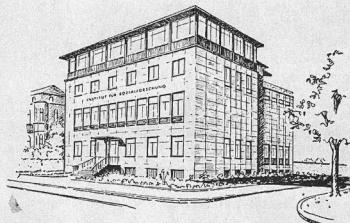


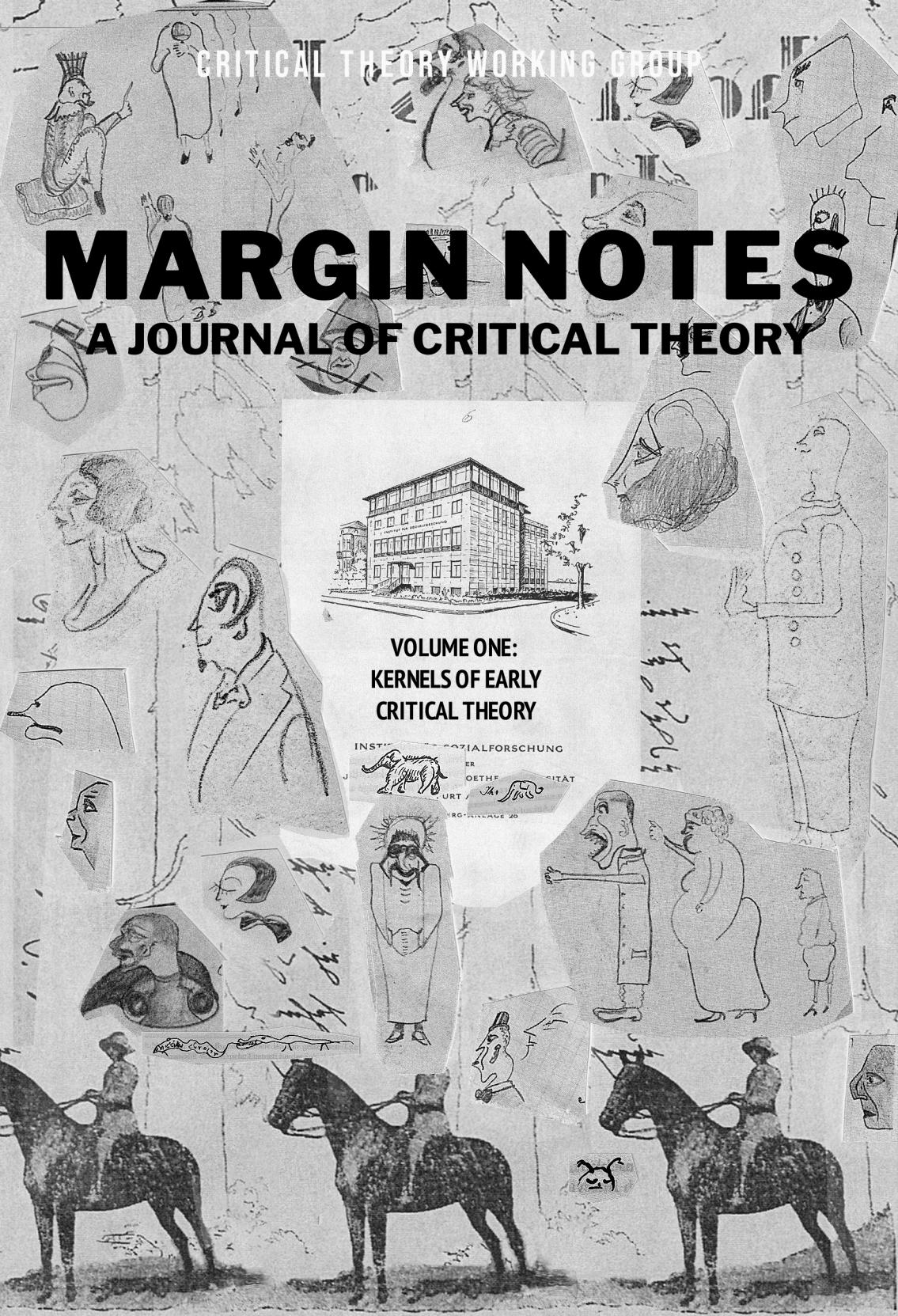
CRITICAL THEORY WORKING GROUP

# MARGIN NOTES

## A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL THEORY



VOLUME ONE:  
KERNELS OF EARLY  
CRITICAL THEORY



# **Margin Notes**

## Volume 1: Kernels of Early Critical Theory

Fall 2024

### **Editorial Board**

James Crane  
Mac Parker  
Samuel J. Thomas  
J. E. Morain  
Esther Planas Balduz  
Zachary Loeffler  
Anatarah Bin AlKaf  
Jefferson Lin  
Re Tejus



MARGIN NOTES: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL  
THEORY

Margin Notes Volume 1: Kernels of Early Critical Theory. A Journal of Critical Theory.

© 2024

This volume, including all its contents, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license, and made available in Open Access at <https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/>. The authors of the individual contributions, who are identified as such, retain the copyright over their original work.

For more information on the CC BY 4.0 license, please refer to:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>.

This volume was typeset in L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X by Anatarah Bin AlKaf and Re Tejus using *varianTeX* — a reusable template for journals in the Humanities, developed by Wout Dillen. *varianTeX* is open source, available on GitHub, and deposited in the Zenodo Open Science Repository. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3484651.

# Contents

<b>I. Preface</b>	<b>3</b>
1. <i>James Crane</i> : Recovering the Kernels of Early Critical Theory	5
<b>II. Essays</b>	<b>21</b>
2. <i>Mac Parker</i> : Essence in the Archaic: Notes Towards a Historical Materialist Account of the Concept of Essence	23
3. <i>Samuel J. Thomas</i> : On the Falsity of Prevailing Ideas: The Concept of Ideology in Early Critical Theory	85
4. <i>J. E. Morain</i> : Analytic Social Psychology as Critical Social Theory: A Reconstruction of Erich Fromm's Early Work	127
5. <i>Esther Planas Balduz</i> : Horkheimer's Materialism vs Morals and Metaphysics: Its Limitations and Possibilities	153
6. <i>Zachary Loeffler</i> : On the Social Situation of Adorno's Critical Music Theory	189
<b>III. Appendices</b>	<b>243</b>
A. <i>Mac Parker</i> : Appendix 1 - Methodology	245
B. <i>Mac Parker</i> : Appendix 2 - Slavery, Commercialization and the Changing Mode of Production in Pre-Archaic Greece	253
C. <i>Samuel J. Thomas</i> : Appendix 3 -Précis of Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia	269



## Preface



# Recovering the Kernels of Early Critical Theory

James Crane

The CTWG is a voluntary collective of researchers united by the recognition that recovering the radical, forgotten core of early critical theory coincides with renewing the singular effort of early critical theorists to comprehend our common predicament in the course of its reiteration—the reasserted social domination of capital covered in the vanishing alternation of liberal apologetic and fascist enforcement. Moreover, that the radicality of their work is validated in their apprehension it would be forgotten in the same dynamic stasis (*Sempre erranti e sempre qui!*)<sup>1</sup> which would re- engender the very need that first engendered it. To the extent early critical theory seems to us to have a tragic character, this does not derive from the fact it has largely been forgotten, but from the fact it is still needed at all. For us, as for the early critical theorists themselves, the enduring validity of the critical theory of society, of its critical diagnostic of capitalist society and its social theorists, is a bitter confirmation that its dream is still unrealized. Critical Theory is only right in a wrong world.

Following recent scholarship on the origin and formation of critical theory (a period stretching from the late 1910s through the early 1940s, though we focus on the 1930s), our recovery takes its point of orientation from the intersection of two premises. First, early critical theory was—and can only be adequately understood and evaluated as—a development and extension of the Marxian critique of political economy, which inherited the impulses of dissident (and particularly councilist) communism. Second, the traditional, and still predominant, reception of early critical theory has not interpreted it as such given, on the one hand, the popular context, intellectual and political, in which

---

<sup>1</sup> Horkheimer: “The individual no longer has a personal history. Though everything changes, nothing moves. He needs neither a Zeno nor a Cocteau, neither an Eleatic dialectician nor a Parisian surrealist, to tell what the Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* means when she says, ‘It takes all the running you can do to stay in the same place, or what Lombroso’s madman expressed in his beautiful poem: *Noi confitti al nostro orgoglio / Come ruote in ferrei perni, / Ci stanchiamo in giri eterni, / Sempre erranti e sempre qui!*’” *Eclipse of Reason*. (Bloomsbury, 2013), 112.

it has been received since the student movements of the late '60s,<sup>2</sup> and, on the other, the neglect in academic scholarship of the esoteric form of writing consciously cultivated by early critical theorists.<sup>3</sup>

This esoteric form of early critical theory is configured by three elements: tactical self-censorship, esoteric technique, and the negative method of presentation required by the dialectical conception of the critique of political economy. To a much larger degree than has been appreciated, their esotericism can be explained by 'tactical' considerations of the benefits of implementing self-censorship protocols in the hostile, anti-communist conditions of their theoretical production in exile, as is especially evident from their correspondence. However, as an esoteric *technique*, it was more than a tactic. It was an expression of the refusal to capitulate in thought to those compromises required of them in fact.

The Institute's original organ of publication was the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which appeared in German from 1932-1939. It may still have fulfilled its function even when its distribution was prohibited in Germany: to make a number of readers conscious of the fact that political powerlessness does not necessarily entail the sacrifice of the intellect.<sup>4</sup>

In a particularly revealing letter to Horkheimer in late 1941, Adorno makes a 'tactical' recommendation to remove an explicit reference to Marx from a draft of an essay to appear in the ISR's journal, providing three reasons: "Those in-the-know know it anyway, the others need not notice, and it should annoy Grossmann."<sup>5</sup> Eva-Maria Ziege has called it "an esoteric form of communication,"<sup>6</sup> one meant not only to help the early critical theorists avoid potential political persecution but also to enable them to continue their collective work on what they often referred

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Chris O'Kane. "On Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Political Economy." JHI Blog, January 10, 2024. <https://www.jhiblog.org/2024/01/10/on-frankfurt-school-critical-theory-and-political-economy/>

<sup>3</sup> Eva-Maria Ziege, *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie. Die Frankfurter Schule im amerikanischen Exil.* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 42-43; Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and Eva-Maria Ziege, "70 Jahre Dialektik der Aufklärung," in *Zur Kritik der regressiven Vernunft*, ed. Noerr & Ziege (Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 2019) 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno "Eine Stätte der Forschung (1941)," *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. 20.2, (Suhrkamp-Verlag, 1997). Author's translation.

<sup>5</sup> Adorno to Horkheimer, 8/18/1941. *Max Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften, Volume 17.* (Hereafter: MHGS Vol. #). Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and Alfred Schmidt. (1996), 134. Author's translation.

<sup>6</sup> Eva-Maria Ziege, "The Irrationality of the Rational. The Frankfurt School and Its Theory of Society in the 1940s" in *Antisemitism and the Constitution of Sociology*, ed. Marcel Stoetzler (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 275-276.

to simply as “the theory”<sup>7</sup>—and “*there is only one theory.*”

What do we actually mean by “essence”? Even in Marx, the tension between essence and appearance is due to the fact that he sees society under the aspect of communism. (...) We formulate in the manner of Spinoza. The essence in appearance consists in a relationship of the phenomenon, what is given, to what is possible. There is only one theory.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to implementing protocols of tactical self-censorship under pressure and elaborating an esoteric technique in protest, the early critical theorists insist on a negative method of presentation derived from the conception of the *critique* inherent to the critique of political economy itself: “Marxist science constitutes the critique of bourgeois economy and not the expounding of a socialist one.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, “Marx (...) wrests from bourgeois society the standard of legitimacy it fashions for itself, shows it cannot fulfill this, and, at the same time, maintains such a standard as a negative expression of the right society,” the realization of which “would abolish this form of society itself.”<sup>10</sup> Later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), they give their pithiest formulation of this orientation, inverting Spinoza and Hegel: *the false is the index of itself and the true.*<sup>11</sup>

What they term “the critical irony of Marxian conceptuality”<sup>12</sup> lies in the dialectical gesture of learning dialectic from the immanent contradiction of capitalist society, by virtue of which it secures its own reproduction through crisis, to *meet guile with double guile*,<sup>13</sup> to turn its own cunning against it with a “naivete” that preserves “an element of childhood, the courage to be weak that gives the child the idea that it will ultimately overcome even what is most difficult.”<sup>14</sup> Horkheimer calls this the ‘logical structure of the critique of political economy’ in Marx’s *Capital*, in which the dialectical necessity of deductions within

<sup>7</sup> Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe” [1939], translation by Mark Ritter. *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*. Ed. Stephen Eric Bronner & Douglas Mackay Kellner (Routledge, 1989), 77-78

<sup>8</sup> Horkheimer [1939]. *MHGS Vol. 12*. (1985), 523-524. Author’s translation.

<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State” [1942], Trans. Peoples’ Translation Service in Berkeley and Elliott Eisenberg. *Telos* Spring 1973, No. 15 (1973); doi:10.3817/0373015003, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer [1939]. *MHGS Vol. 12* (1985), 438. Author’s translation.

<sup>11</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (SUP, 2002), 31.

<sup>12</sup> “The Marxian method and its applicability to the analysis of the present crisis. Seminar Discussion (1936),” *MHGS Vol 12*. (1985), 402. Author’s translation.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage (Yale University Press, 1970), 34.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (MIT Press, 1993), 42-43.

the self-referential context of the logic of the commodity in theory mirrors the processual necessity of the self-contradictory totality of capitalist society itself; however, in the course of this presentation, the truly dialectical reversal is prepared, through which this dialectically self-necessitating totality is denied its absoluteness in the practice of human self-emancipation.

[I]n Marx's *Capital* concrete tendencies are derived from the first simple and general concepts within a logical self-referential context; these lead to destruction. The consistency of logical forms, the necessity of the dialectical deductions correspond here to the natural necessity with which economic principles prevail in the reality of this society. Other forms of presentation as well as other theoretical methods would, therefore, be appropriate to a condition of enhanced freedom and a more rational social structure. These can't be anticipated now.<sup>15</sup>

Horkheimer suggests in a 1939 conversation with Adorno that the trick is neither believing in happiness when faced with the "objective despair" of the present nor relinquishing the anobjective claim on a happy future, to which Adorno responds: "We must be much more naive [*naiver*] and much more unnaive [*unnaiver*] at the same time."<sup>16</sup>

Yet, because critical theory *does not dogmatically anticipate the world, but finds the new world through the criticism of the old one*,<sup>17</sup> it has "no secret doctrine" (Adorno);<sup>18</sup> its indirect, dialectical method of presentation is "one of rational self-identification" which holds out for true agreement with the addressee who makes it to the end (*the truth is in the whole, but that whole is untrue*), and is therefore "by no means an esoteric one" (Horkheimer).<sup>19</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer (1939) go so far as to refer to the *Communist Manifesto* as a stylistic model, as it demonstrates that "[i]n theory, everything has to be equally close to the center."<sup>20</sup> Each sentence of the *Manifesto* presents the reader with a formative experience

<sup>15</sup> Horkheimer to Grossmann, 10/1/1935. *A Life in Letters. Selected Correspondence by Max Horkheimer*. Ed. & translated by Evelyn M. Jacobson, Manfred R. Jacobson (University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 56-58.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno [1939]. *MHGS Vol. 12* (1985), 509-510. Author's translation.

<sup>17</sup> Horkheimer says these lines of Marx could serve as a "motto" for his essays of the 1930s. Letter to Hans Mayer (12/17/1937) in *Life in Letters*. Ed. Jacobson & R. Jacobson (2007), 121-124. For the full exchange with Mayer, see *MHGS Vol. 16* (1995b), 297-305; 333-337.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno [1939]: "On the other hand, I have no secret doctrine either. I believe, however, that the kind of view I have is such that it finds the reflexion in things of the very source of light which cannot be the object of intentions and thoughts." *MHGS Vol. 12* (1985), 506. Author's translation.

<sup>19</sup> Horkheimer [1939]. *MHGS Vol. 12* (1985), 477. Author's translation.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno [1939] *MHGS Vol. 12* (1985), 509. Author's translation.

of their own, something everyone has already thought for themselves, but in such a way as to “penetrate the facade” over the world, the “fog” of complications and the false “opacity” that serve as “a veil to cover up the simplicity of it all,” which makes the world seem “incomprehensible” to those who comprise it.<sup>21</sup> In his pseudonymous *Dämmerung* (1934), Horkheimer distills the essence of their technique: “Language must therefore be prevented from creating the illusion of a community that does not exist in class society,” but “has to be used as a means in the struggle for a united world” and “today, the words of the fighters and martyrs of that struggle seem to be coming from that world.”<sup>22</sup> The anti-esoteric esotericism of early critical theory meant to introduce a torsion in language, giving lie to the harmonizing semblance of communicative reason in the present,<sup>23</sup> out of fidelity to the vulnerable possibility of “the society we imagine as unfolded reason.”<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the archive of posthumously published writings, the “concept of reason” that early critical theory seeks to realize is given an unambiguous determination: “Classless society in the critical sense.”<sup>25</sup> However, already in the original publication of “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937) in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Horkheimer defines the idea of critical theory as such through a negative formulation of the communist program:

Critical theory, despite the clarity it may have into the individual steps of social transformation and the agreement of its elements with those of the most advanced traditional theories, has no authority of its own except the concern for the abolition of class domination [*Interesse an der Aufhebung der Klassenherrschaft*] connected with it.<sup>26</sup>

As Christian Voller has recently demonstrated, even under self-imposed censorship protocols, the description of a “rationally organized

<sup>21</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer [1939]. *MHGS* Vol. 12 (1985), 512-513. Author’s translation.

<sup>22</sup> Horkheimer, “The Urbanity of Language,” *Dawn & Decline*. Trans. Michael Shaw. (Continuum: Seabury Press, 1978), 75-76.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hermann Schwenckföhl, “The Concept of Language and Linguistic Presentation in Horkheimer and Adorno” (1986), Trans. James/Crane. CTWG Blog, April 22, 2024. <https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/language/>

<sup>24</sup> Horkheimer to Adolph Lowe, 1/4/1938. *MHGS* Vol. 16 (1995), 355-356. Author’s translation.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer [1939]. *MHGS* Vol. 12 (1985), 514. Author’s translation.

<sup>26</sup> “Traditionelle und kritische Theorie”. *ZfS* vol. 6, no. 2, pages 245-294, (1937), 291-292. Author’s translation. The extant English translation in *Critical Theory* (2002) is based on the revision of the essay under Horkheimer’s direction for the republication of a selection of his early essays in German in 1968, which substitutes “gesellschaftliche Unrecht” [social injustice] for “Klassenherrschaft” [class domination].

society” which constitutes the normative horizon of the most circumspect early critical theorists—Adorno and Horkheimer in particular—is drawn almost verbatim from a single passage in Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology*.<sup>27</sup>

Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all natural premises as the creatures of hitherto existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals.<sup>28</sup>

This idea of a “rationally organized society,” Horkheimer explains in a letter of 1938, “coincides with that of the association of free human beings,” and this “coincidence of which we speak is brought about by the socialization of the means of production and the abolition of classes and is ever-renewed by the active participation of individuals in administration.”<sup>29</sup> Through the late 1940s, their critical criterion is furnished by “the ideal of social self-administration of the productive forces in the mode of a universalized republic of councils.”<sup>30</sup> Not even *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) is an exception:

[W]ith the revolutionary avant-garde, the utopia which proclaimed the reconciliation between nature and the self emerged from its hiding place in German philosophy as something at once irrational and rational, as the idea of the association of free individuals—and brought down on itself the full fury of reason.<sup>31</sup>

This is most explicit in essays such as Adorno’s “Theses on Need” (1942) and Horkheimer’s “Authoritarian State” (1942), in which ‘the democracy of the councils’ is presented as the completion of socialist construction or ‘socialization’ suppressed (but possibly latent) in state socialism, as the measure of the betrayal of democracy under the formal equality of liberal principles in crisis-prone capitalist societies, and as the antithesis of fascist nationalization that re-privatizes public functions in the hands of warring cliques which vie to be the dominant particularity of a universal

<sup>27</sup> Christian Voller, *In der Dämmerung. Studien zu Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Kritische Theorie* (Matthes & Seitz, 2023), 61-63.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Vol. 5 of *Collected Works*. (Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 81.

<sup>29</sup> Horkheimer to Adolph Lowe, (1/4/1938). MHGS Vol. 16 (1995), 353-354. Author's translation.

<sup>30</sup> Voller traces Adorno’s “Theses on Need” [1942] back to the theoretical-political problematic elaborated in the works of Karl Korsch. *Dämmerung* (2023), 140-142.

<sup>31</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. Jephcott & ed. Noerr (2007), 71.

state.<sup>32</sup> There is an invariant program at the foundation of early critical theory:

The theoretical conception which, following its first trailblazers, will show the new society its way—the system of workers' councils—grows out of praxis. The roots of the council system go back to 1871, 1905, and other events. Revolutionary transformation has a tradition that must continue.<sup>33</sup>

The “obstinacy” with which the critical theorist smashes the fetishes which occlude its realization of “the association of free human beings in which each has the same possibility of self-development” and sifts through the *caput mortuum* of modern humanity for traces of its possibility is what gives early critical theory its fragility, its “common bond” with “fantasy.”<sup>34</sup> The universalized republic of councils is the contested possibility of mediation between universal and particular interest, the telos of any truly revolutionary internationalism, the emancipation of humanity and nature from the compulsions of capital accumulation through which humanity might be realized for the first time, and the concretion of self-enlightening of enlightenment.

With the thoroughgoing organization of humanity towards a common plan, alienation ends, because no one confronts it as alien anymore. The process is completed when the universal plan is no longer forced upon the individual by external violence, even if that plan is ideologically disguised as one's own. (...) This was Marxist reason, the free association of humanity, free from the unplanned effects of social power. Only then, when each in their conduct becomes a means of the whole, do they also become an end to the whole and to themselves. Once the means is fully recognized as an end, we are freed from the domination of means. (...) The only rescue for thinking tired of the triumph of means is to drive it to the point of reversal. It is not true that enlightenment is at an end.<sup>35</sup>

The modest contribution of early critical theory consists in providing a model for the exploration and comprehension of, as a fellow traveler will later express it, “the aporia intrinsic to socialist activity between the daily struggle and the goal beyond the limits of that struggle, which therefore cannot secure itself in advance.”<sup>36</sup> The problem is one of true

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, “Theses on Need” [1942], Translation by David Fernbach. *New Left Review* 128 (2021): 79-82. Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State” [1942], *Telos* (1973), 8-10. Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe” [1939], 78, 85-86.

<sup>33</sup> Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State” [1942], *Telos* (1973), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Horkheimer. “Traditional and Critical Theory” [1937]. *Critical Theory* (2002), 219-220. Translation modified.

<sup>35</sup> Horkheimer, “Magic of the Concept” (1949). *MHGS Vol. 12* (1985), 323-325. Author's translation

<sup>36</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*. (Blackwell, 1992),

revolution—total revolution—for any movement seeking to overturn capitalist society that risks, through their very opposition to it, inadvertently reinforcing it: “The revolutionary movement negatively reflects the situation which it is attacking”; “Whatever seeks to extend itself under domination runs the danger of reproducing it.”<sup>37</sup> This task cannot be abdicated even in the ongoing obliteration and cooptation of revolutionary movements from which the concepts of early critical theory first emerged, for “the knowledge of the falling fighter, insofar as it reflects the structure of the present epoch and the basic possibility of a better one, is not dishonored because humanity succumbs to bombs and poison gases.”<sup>38</sup> The critical theorist is tasked with preserving and intensifying our unease with the world which exists, to return us to these concepts ignited by the liquidated enemies of capitalist social domination and ensure, by our own will, that “the truth of them will out.”<sup>39</sup> This negative unity of opposites—restless critique of this world and unwavering aim at its abolition—is the “illusion-free orientation” into which early critical theory would initiate us.<sup>40</sup>

To the degree we remain loyal to the early critical theorists, our recovery is critical.<sup>41</sup> This is, as Adorno expresses and performs it, the minimum condition of loyalty to dialectical theory:

Everyone says that Marxism is done for. To this we say, no, it is not done for, but rather, that one must remain loyal to it. But if one is actually loyal to it, then this can only mean driving the movement of the dialectical process further.<sup>42</sup>

Or, in an uncharacteristically laconic formulation of Horkheimer’s: “Progress in ideas does not consist in “novelty” but in a life-process in which existing ideas are transformed through the acts by which they are experienced.”<sup>43</sup> Rather than pass judgment on the legitimacy of their

205-206. Cf., Rose *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7-8.

<sup>37</sup> Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State” [1942]. *Telos* (1973), 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Horkheimer, “On the Problem of Truth [1935].” *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings, Max Horkheimer*. Translated by G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (MIT Press, 1993), 199-200.

<sup>39</sup> Horkheimer, “Postscript [to Traditional and Critical Theory].” *Critical Theory*. (2002), 251.

<sup>40</sup> Horkheimer to Wittfogel, (8/21/1935), MHGS Vol. 15 (1995), 389-391. Author’s translation.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture” in *Critical Theory* (2002), 286-289. And, Adorno and Horkheimer, “Thought” from “Notes and Sketches” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (2002), 203.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno [1939]. MHGS Vol. 12 (1985), 524. Author’s translation.

<sup>43</sup> Horkheimer to the Editors of the *Philosophical Review*, April 1949. *Life in Letters*

esoteric strategy, we seek to engage their work in those terms which they, rightly or wrongly, concealed, and do so in the name of overcoming the very “context of delusion”<sup>44</sup> in which they felt compelled to conceal them. More than that, we seek to hold them to the measure of these terms without making excuses for them. To paraphrase Horkheimer’s critique of the apologetic reception of Nietzsche, the eloquence which would cover for their naivete and illusions, or excuse them as ‘thinkers of their time,’ delivers them, having been made presentable and thereby unintelligible, over to the same society against which their antagonism was uncompromising and within which they were compromised.<sup>45</sup> To paraphrase Adorno’s critique of the apologetic reception of Kierkegaard, for the thorns they felt stinging their own flesh and turned against society, they deserve, at the very least, faithful rather than deferential exegesis.<sup>46</sup> To express this polemically: the living kernels of early critical theory from the works of the early critical theorists cannot be recovered apart from the partisan criticism of capitalism, the early critical theorists themselves, and their critics.

\* \* \*

In the following essays, the “non-dogmatic”<sup>47</sup> Marxian core of early critical theory is emphasized in the spirit of what Horkheimer and Adorno later call the “productive orthodoxy”<sup>48</sup> of their reception of Freud: reconstructive fidelity to the boundaries of their thought, the unresolved integrity of which can only be presented through critique.

In “Essence in the Archaic: Notes Towards a Historical Materialist Account of the Concept of Essence,” Mac Parker takes on the challenge posed in Marcuse’s “Concept of Essence” (1936)<sup>49</sup> the historical-materialist reconceptualization of the concept of essence, understood by

(2007), 270-72.

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton (Routledge, 2004), 141, 182, 406.

<sup>45</sup> Horkheimer, “Bemerkungen zu Jaspers’ ‘Nietzsche.’” *ZfS* V6, Issue 2, 1937, 407-414.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, “[Double review of Wahl, Jean *Etudes Kierkegaardien* & Lowrie, Walter *The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard*.]” *ZfS* Jahrgang 8: 1939-1940; V8, Issue 1/2, 1939, 232-235.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Karl Korsch, “A Non-Dogmatic Approach to Marxism” (1946), transcribed by Anthony Blunden for Marxists.org in 2003 [link: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1946/non-dogmatic.htm>]

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Horkheimer, “Ernst Simmel und die Freudsche Philosophie” (1947). *MHGS*, Vol. 5 (1987), 396-405. Cf. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis” (1952), Translated by Nan-Nan Lee. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40(3); 2014., 326-337.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. “ZfS in English” for links to available English translations of the essays published in the ISR’s ZfS/SPSS. CTWG Blog, November 6, 2024. <https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/language/>

the early critical theorists as the potential freedom inherent in different historical situations in which the doctrine of essence received philosophical elaboration. Responding in kind, Parker challenges Marcuse's transcendental-idealistic methodological presuppositions, according to which the task of the theorist is discovering the schematism through which the thought of a historical period is determined on the basis of an historical a priori set of conditions of possibility, which prevent Marcuse from fulfilling this desideratum. Instead, Parker argues for an alternative model for theorizing the social determination of thought: beginning from detail-oriented analysis of historical material, reconstruction of the asymmetric relations of reciprocal determination between changes in the economic base (broadly considered) and the philosophical-ideological superstructure, with a focus on the analysis of the role of class-situated subjective mediation in the translation of objective conditions into determinations of thought. The majority of the essay is a test of this model in the case of the emergence of the concept of essence in ancient Greece, which provides the basis for a criticism of competing accounts of the advent of philosophy in Greek antiquity offered by historians and the early critical theorists themselves (from Sohn-Rethel to Adorno).

In "On the Falsity of Prevailing Ideas: The Concept of Ideology in Early Critical Theory," Samuel J. Thomas argues for the importance of Horkheimer's critique of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* in the early 1930s for a *critical theory of ideology*.<sup>50</sup> Distinguishing between *Ideologietheorie* and *Ideologiekritik*, Thomas demonstrates that Horkheimer's critique of the methodology of Mannheim's 'value-free' 'sociology of knowledge' (*Wissenssoziologie*) turns on this distinction and, moreover, on the problematic and unreflective separation of these moments in Mannheim's project. In the course of this reconstruction, Thomas develops a model for diagnosing the pitfalls of more contemporary, one-sided approaches to theories and critiques of ideology and argues that the singular difficulty of analyzing ideology under the conditions of capitalist social relations requires the adoption of a specific conception of the dialectical method. Presenting the unity of *Ideologietheorie* and *Ideologiekritik* in Horkheimer's own work throughout the 1930s, in which ideology *theory* focuses on the functional role of ideology in relations of class domination and ideology *critique* focuses on the relation between ideology and totality (as well as ideological theories of ideology and totality), Thomas contextualizes Horkheimer's own conception of ideol-

---

<sup>50</sup> For a supplementary précis of Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, see Samuel J. Thomas, "Précis of Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia." CTWG Blog, November 12, 2024. <https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/Mannheim/>

ogy as self-contextualizing. This is required by the self-reflexive core of the critical theory of ideology, which Thomas calls the ‘double determination’ of any inquiry into ideology itself: the mode in which capitalist social totality determines the object of analysis and the subject of the researcher who seeks to offer a theory or critique of ideology. After exhibiting this approach in the case of Horkheimer’s own analysis of the bourgeois revolutionary in the figure of Tommaso Campanella (*inter alia*), Thomas concludes with polemical suggestions for the further development of the critical theory of ideology.

In “Analytic Social Psychology as Critical Social Theory,” J.E. Morain recovers the early work of Erich Fromm, a foundational and unjustly neglected figure in accounts of the formation of early critical theory—specifically, the ISR’s project of developing an ‘analytic social psychology,’ which would provide the conceptual scaffolding of the group’s *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (1936) and, arguably, the framework and foci of the ‘socio-psychological’ approach to empirical research the ISR would use throughout the 1940s, culminating in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950).<sup>51</sup> In this essay, Morain begins with a critical survey of secondary literature on Fromm’s contribution to ‘The Frankfurt School,’ which, on the whole, has read Fromm from a ‘standpoint of redemption’ that assumes the condemnation of his work from the outset. In Morain’s reconstructive-reparative approach, Fromm is restored to his role as the author of the interdisciplinary synthesis of historical materialism and classical psychoanalysis that underlies the ISR’s famous ‘Freudo-Marxism’: explanations of the large-scale social phenomena posited by historical materialism on the basis of the psychic dynamics of individuals as conceived by Freudian psychoanalysis. Fromm’s approach is shown to outfit early critical theory with the ‘*microfoundations*’ of their conception of social reproduction. In explicit and militant opposition to any transhistorical theory of human motivation or ‘interests’ in the life of society, as well as to the vulgar Marxist theory of ‘reflection,’ Fromm reorients social psychology to an analysis of the *mediation* of economic ‘base’ and ideological ‘superstructure,’ social existence and social consciousness, by the network of institutions in which the psychic character of individuals is formed—for the sake of producing functional, capitalist subjects—in the course of capitalist social reproduction as a whole. In

---

<sup>51</sup> See Morain’s recent report on research conducted at the Erich Fromm archive on the CTWG blog, which reconstructs the systematic, Marxian conception Fromm contributed to the ISR’s *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (1936): “The Origins of Studien über Autorität und Familie.” CTWG Blog, April 27, 2024. [https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/origins\\_of\\_the\\_family/](https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/origins_of_the_family/)

particular, Fromm's focus is on the *family* as a complex of mediations, which serves, Fromm argues, as the primary agent of socialization and influence on the social formation of psychic character-structure. Morain differentiates Fromm's particular appropriation psychoanalytic theory from that of Freudian orthodoxy and develops Fromm's distinctive conception of 'analytic social psychology' in a reconstruction of three basic concepts: social-psychic 'cement' (distinct from 'ideology' proper), 'the psychic structure of society,' and a unique concept of 'ideology' in social reproduction, which, in conjunction, provide the elements for Fromm's social-psychological 'crisis' theory, according to which, as Fromm puts it in his inaugural essay in the *ZfS*, "the libidinal energies" which comprise the social-psychic cement "no longer serve the preservation of the society, but contribute to the development of new social formations. They cease to be 'cement,' and turn into dynamite."<sup>52</sup> Morain concludes with a critique of three main limitations in Fromm's work in light of further developments—past or potential—in the project of developing an 'analytic social psychology.'

In "Horkheimer's Materialism vs Morals and Metaphysics: Its Limitations and Possibilities," Esther Planas Balduz tackles the problem of the normative orientation of early critical theory through immanent critique of Horkheimer's foundational essays on Marxist materialism for the *ZfS*: "Materialism and Metaphysics" (1932) and "Materialism and Morals" (1932).<sup>53</sup> Namely: how can we account for the moral dimension of the Marxist materialist's critique of morality? Notwithstanding the critique of 'value-free' social theory in early critical theory as a whole, and in Horkheimer's work in particular, Horkheimer himself criticizes moral conflicts, particularly in moral philosophy, for failing to recognize that they occur in the context of a world that is itself wrong, a society that is itself unjust. Planas Balduz begins here, interrogating the perspective from which the value judgment which assesses the world qua society as a totality has been—and, perhaps, ought to be—made. In the course of the essay, Planas Balduz reconstructs the method with which Horkheimer traces the categories of 'materialism,' 'morality,' and 'metaphysics' proper to each of these fields of judgment back to the constitutive, modern tension between 'subjective' and 'social' value judgments about what is considered socially and personally unbearable.

---

<sup>52</sup> Fromm, "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology: Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism" [1932]. *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. (New York: Continuum, 1977), 495.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. "ZfS in English." CTWG Blog, November 6, 2024. <https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2023/ZfS/>

In the above-mentioned foundational essays on Marxist materialism, Horkheimer argues that, and shows us how, sociology and positivist philosophy repeat this core tension through the rejection of value judgement, which binds them to their negative doubles—idealist moral philosophy of unconditional obligation and proto-totalitarian romanticism of unconditional self-determination. It is precisely because of the power of Horkheimer's critique of 'value-free' social theory and science which, Planas Balduz concludes, compels us to pose two questions. First, given Horkheimer's concern in these essays with questions of the individual in relation to the moral law, how can we relate his arguments to the position of the individual relative to the 'second nature' laws of the capitalist market? Or: in what sense is Horkheimer's 'materialist' critique of morality materialist? Second, to the extent that materialism requires a critique of morality, how can we reconcile this with the need to confront the a-moral morality in the critique of socialism in neoliberal social thought? Or: does Horkheimer's moral anti-moralism have its own negative double in the hegemonic discourse of the present?

In "On the Social Situation of Adorno's Critical Music Theory," Zach Loeffler restores Adorno's eccentric musical perspective in the early 1930s—represented in particular by his first published contribution to early critical theory in the ISR's orbit, "On the Social Situation of Music" (1932)—to its own 'social situation': namely, as an effort to elaborate the theoretical consequences of direct proletarian action and worker militancy in the first years of the Weimar Republic, its brutal suppression, and its ongoing structural absence for a critical theory of artistic production. In the course of the essay, Loeffler reinterprets "Social Situation" through the late self-critique Adorno provides of the essay more than three decades later, reconstructing the re-articulation of Adorno's theory of music through the reconfiguration of several ambivalences through which his earlier theoretical perspective develops. In the course of this reinterpretation, Adorno's late musical theory is itself read in light of the young Adorno's project of thinking music in its total 'social situation.' The perspective which emerges is as follows: if music is to do justice to the promise of fulfillment made by bourgeois art, then it must embody the truth of the untruth of capitalism and in turn something of a truly free, non-instrumental sociality bridging the gap between theory and revolutionary praxis; and if music is to do these things, then its material must be rationalized past the point where class society necessarily cuts rationalization short, a process which renders music socially mute and functionless. The musical rearticulation of Adorno's critical theory therefore makes legible the Marxism of "consummate negativity"

and maximalist communism that form the crux of his work, rendering concrete the negotiation of the problem of freedom vis-à-vis theory and praxis in the face of intractable social compulsion and the concrete possibility of realizing its mirror image.

## Bibliography

- ADORNO, THEODOR W. "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie". *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6 (1937)(2): 245–294. doi:10.5840/zfs19376265.
- . "Double review of Wahl, Jean Etudes Kierkegaardianes Lowrie, Walter The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard". *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8 (1939)(1/2): 232–235.
- . *Hegel: Three Studies*. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.
- . "Eine Stätte der Forschung". In *Gesammelte Schriften Vol. 20.2*, edited by Theodor W. Adorno. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp-Verlag, 1997. Originally published in 1941.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. London: Routledge, 2004.
- . "Revisionist Psychoanalysis". *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40 (2014)(3): 326–337. Originally written in 1952.
- . "Theses on Need". *New Left Review* 128 (2021): 79–82. Originally written in 1942.
- ADORNO, THEODOR W. AND MAX HORKHEIMER. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Standford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- ENGELS, FRIEDRICH AND KARL MARX. *The German Ideology*, volume 5 of *Marx-Engels Collected Works*. Lawrence & Wishart, 1976. Originally written in 1845.
- FROMM, ERICH. "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology: Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism". In *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, edited by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. London and New York: Continuum, 1977. Originally published in 1932.

- HORKHEIMER, MAX. "Bemerkungen zu Jaspers' 'Nietzsche'". *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung (ZfS)* 6 (1937)(2): 407–414.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Authoritarian State". *Telos* 15 (1973). doi:10.3817/0373015003. Originally written in 1942.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Dawn Decline*. Translated by Michael Shaw. London and New York: Continuum/Seabury Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 12. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 5. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Jews and Europe". In *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edited by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Mackay Kellner. London: Routledge, 1989. Originally published in 1939, translated by Mark Ritter.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*. Translated by G. Frederick Hunter and John Torpey. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 15. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 16. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 17. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. London and New York: Continuum, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Life in Letters: Selected Correspondence*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Eclipse of Reason*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- KORSCH, KARL. "A Non-Dogmatic Approach to Marxism", 1946.  
URL <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1946/non-dogmatic.htm>. Transcribed by Anthony Blunden for Marxists.org in 2003.

NOERR, GUNZELIN SCHMID AND EVA-MARIA ZIEGE. "70 Jahre Dialektik der Aufklärung". In *Zur Kritik der regressiven Vernunft*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and Eva-Maria Ziege. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019.

O'KANE, CHRIS. "On Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Political Economy". *JHI Blog* (2024). URL <https://www.jhiblog.org/2024/01/10/on-frankfurt-school-critical-theory-and-political-economy/>.

RICOEUR, PAUL. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970.

ROSE, GILLIAN. *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1992.

SCHWEPPENHÄUSER, GERHARD. *Zur Aktualität von Max Horkheimer: Einführung in sein Werk*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023.

VOLLER, CHRISTIAN. *In der Dämmerung: Studien zu Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Kritische Theorie*. Berlin: Matthes Seitz, 2023.

ZIEGE, EVA-MARIA. *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie. Die Frankfurter Schule im amerikanischen Exil*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009.

———. "The Irrationality of the Rational. The Frankfurt School and Its Theory of Society in the 1940s". In *Antisemitism and the Constitution of Sociology*, edited by Marcel Stoetzler. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

# **Essays**



# Essence in the Archaic: Notes Towards a Historical Materialist Account of the Concept of Essence

*Mac Parker*

"This communism...is the genuine resolution of the conflict, between man and nature and between man and man – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution."

— Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*<sup>1</sup>

I've never read an account of the socio-historical determination of philosophy that fully satisfied me. There always seems to be some level of mediation missing, some level of distortion or sleight of hand at play in the explanatory framework. This problem really crystallized for me when I read and presented on Marcuse's essay "The Concept of Essence" with the Critical Theory Working Group last fall. The way it subsumed the history of philosophy under its gaze thrilled me at the same time as it set off alarm bells in the back of my mind. Its attack on the ahistorical pretensions of philosophy appealed to the historical materialist in me and its systematic account of Marxism as a theory of essence appealed to the philosopher in me. At the same time, I had a nagging sense that something was amiss on both counts, and I couldn't really see how it all fit together. As I continued to engage with it, I began to suspect that the specter of totalization, which had been part of the essay's initial appeal, covered over a number of confusions and deficiencies that prevented it from fulfilling the promises that I had originally read into it. These promises are of 1) a historical materialist account of the origins and

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 84.

development of the concept of essence that grounds both in the social conditions from which they arose and 2) a marxist theory of essence that facilitates the project of revolutionary praxis in the present day. I still believe that attempting to fulfill these promises is a worthwhile project, although one that (perhaps predictably) cannot be completed within the bounds of a single essay. With that in mind, I will focus here on laying the groundwork for that larger project, using Marcuse's essay as a jumping-off point for developing my own historical materialist account of the emergence of a recognizable concept of essence in Ancient Greece.<sup>2</sup>

In Part 1, I will begin with a critical examination of Marcuse's account of the historical development of essence and the reasons for its failure to realize what it set out to achieve. I will argue that the most important of these reasons involve a formalist interpretive apparatus and the subsumption of the historical materialist elements in his work under an idealist philosophy of history, which lead him to neglect the concrete socio-historical conditions under which the concept of essence emerged in Ancient Greece. After that I will address the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, which bears some superficial similarities to the investigation undertaken here, but shares many of the problems that plagued Marcuse's account, and use the discussion of his work as an opportunity to further distinguish my project from both of theirs.

In Part 2, I will begin my reconstruction of the social determination of the emergence of the concept of essence in Ancient Greece, starting with the pre-history of the concept of essence. This will involve 1) an examination of what I will call the bardic conception of truth and its situation within an earlier mode of production centered around the warrior-aristocracy depicted in the Homeric epics 2) an account of how the reciprocal dynamic of commercialization and the centralization of slavery within the mode of exploitation, along with changes in the practice of warfare, created a crisis of the traditional warrior aristocracy and the mode of production centered on them, which set the stage for the emergence of a recognizable concept of essence in Pre-Socratic Monism (PSM) and 3) a concluding examination of the works Theognis of Megara and the transitional conception of truth developed in them, which bears marks of both the bardic conception that preceded it and

---

<sup>2</sup> I do not mean to claim that this emergence represented the absolute origins of the concept of essence in a world historical sense, but rather to take it as an example of the emergence of that concept from out of a milieu in which it had previously been absent (and one that appears to have been foundational for the tradition we refer to as Western or European philosophy).

the concept of essence that followed it.

In Part 3, I will turn to PSM itself and its relation to the changes described in the preceding section. First, I will offer an examination and critique of Richard Seaford's account of the origins of PSM and its relation to the money form as a result of what he calls "unconscious cosmological projection." Then, I will elucidate my own positive account of the origins and development of PSM in terms of its ideological function in response to the aristocratic and social crises of the Archaic period and the inability of its proponents to recognize the latent content of the money form as an externalization of the total social labor that posits both the equality of labor and its thoroughgoing interdependence.

Finally, in Part 4 I will discuss the methodological, historical and practical implications of the preceding reconstruction, with an eye to the larger project set out in this introduction.

There are also two appendices attached to this essay, the first of which details the methodological background that underlies the arguments presented in the body of the essay, and the second of which provides a more concrete reconstruction of the relevant historical developments that took place between the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces and the consolidation of the *poleis* in the Archaic. The second in particular is important for putting the developments discussed in Part 2 in their proper perspective and justifying a number of the claims made there.

## 1. The Problem of Historical Reconstruction

### 1.1. Marcuse's Position

My beginning this piece with an examination of Marcuse's essay "The Concept of Essence" is in some sense a nod to the biographical origins of the investigation I am undertaking here. It was his essay that sent me down the path that culminated in the writing of the essay you are reading now. So, if you'll allow me to be a little loose with my terms, beginning in this way can be seen as an attempt to leave somewhat ajar the doors of the hidden abode of production whose product stands before you in the form of a finished work; Or, in a more Hegelian vein, to lay bare the process of mediation without which the result would appear as a bare immediacy stripped of its full meaning and conceptual content. To properly elucidate the concepts developed here, the conceptual and methodological problems in Marcuse's essay that served as their origin must themselves be taken back up into their exposition, and so I must begin with an account of Marcuse's position. At the same time, it should

be understood that the primary purpose of this essay is not the evaluation of that position, but rather the development of an account of the emergence of the concept of essence and its socio-historical determination, which, despite inheriting its object and certain animating problems from Marcuse's account, rests on different principles, principles that could be said to represent the determinate negation of those that Marcuse's essay is founded on. In this sense, Marcuse's position is only a starting point, but it is nevertheless an essential starting point.

At first glance, Marcuse's essay has the appearance of offering a historical materialist account of the emergence and development of the concept of essence (and to some extent it does do so, as we'll see below). It is framed as an attempt to show how "even [the] loftiest conceptions of philosophy are subject to historical development," and how "so much of men's real struggles and desires went into the metaphysical quest for an ultimate unity, truth, and universality of Being that they could not have failed to find expression in the derived forms of the philosophical tradition."<sup>3</sup> This suggests that the project Marcuse is pursuing is an attempt to demonstrate the validity of the basic historical materialist postulate that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."<sup>4</sup> But, upon closer examination, this framing already reveals the deficiencies of his project from the perspective of a genuine, dialectical conception of historical materialism.

The first way in which it does so is by restricting the scope of the socio-historical determination of thought. In order to account for the apparent invariance of the *content* of the concept of essence, which he glosses as "the abstraction and isolation of the one true Being from the constantly changing multiplicity of appearances," Marcuse argues that it is the "*position and function* [of such concepts] within philosophical systems" [italics mine] that is subject to change.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore to the position and function of the concept of essence that we should look to understand its socio-historical determination. But, this division between an invariant content and a historically determined position and function already concedes too much to the idealist position Marcuse is trying to argue against, abstracting and isolating the content of the concept from the realm of historical explanation and positing it as an eternal,

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Mayfly Books, 2009), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya (Progress Publishers, 1977), Preface.

<sup>5</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 31.

transcendent content whose origins are either obscure or unknowable.

The obscurity of the origins of this transcendent content creates a number of problems for the beginning of Marcuse's historical account. Without the ability to give a historical explanation of the origins of the content of the concept of essence, he is forced to posit its emergence as an external bringing-together of independently pre-existing determinations (or of the philosophical problems that underlie them).<sup>6</sup> He argues that it is the bringing-together of the "epistemological" determinations of unity, universality and abstraction with the determination of truth—understood as distinguishing between hierarchically ordered levels of reality—that provides essence with its "critical and ethical elements" and so with its primary function within Plato's philosophy, which is to establish a "critical gap" between what is and what could or should be.<sup>7</sup> He doesn't explain where these determinations, or the problems that form their "philosophical substratum," themselves arise from, or why they are brought together to form the concept of essence, outside of some quasi-mystical and ultimately tautological talk of a "quest for the unity and universality of Being in view of the multiplicity and changeability of beings."<sup>8</sup> It is as if, for Marcuse, the Ancient Greeks already had a notion of essence preconceived in their heads before they went searching for it.

If there *is* an invariance in certain elements of the concept of essence, or of any other metaphysical category—which does have a certain plausibility given a cursory look at the history of philosophy—then that invariance must itself be understood historically. First, it must be established (which it isn't clear to me has been done, whether by Marcuse or anyone else), and then it must be traced to its roots in the socio-historical conditions of the various periods in which it can be observed, whether this means finding some common condition, or set of conditions, that explain its persistence, or providing an explanation of how a set of relatively contingent circumstances led to its maintenance under different modes of production despite lacking such a common basis.<sup>9</sup> Not only

---

<sup>6</sup>     Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 32.

<sup>7</sup>     Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 33. As we shall see in Part 2, there is a notion of truth that pre-exists the emergence of the concept of essence, but it is not until that emergence occurs that it takes on the determination Marcuse attributes to it.

<sup>8</sup>     Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 32–3.

<sup>9</sup>     I will suggest a few possibilities on this score below, such as that it is existence of social presuppositions of the process of production that underlies a certain continuity in the determination of truth, and the monetization of these presuppositions that does the same with continuities in the determination of essence, but these are provisional hypotheses derived from the concrete historical material, and requiring confirmation from

that, but the question of what exactly is invariant in that concept, if anything is, must remain open throughout the investigation. Whether it is actually the determinations of unity, universality, abstraction, and truth that form the invariant content of the concept of essence, or even whether it is in terms of content that the concept is invariant, are questions whose answers, like those to the question of invariance itself, cannot be assumed from the start but must be found, tested, modified, and retested in the material itself as the process of investigation proceeds.

Additionally, this obscurity about origins begins to give us a sense of why there is no historical account of the social conditions of Classical Athens in Marcuse's essay, despite his claim that that is where the concept of essence first emerged. The ahistorical nature of the content allows it to appear as a pure origination, one that seems to have been completely contingent and in no need of explanation. Still, even the supposedly ahistorical nature of the content does not fully explain the complete lack of socio-historical grounding that we are discussing. For example, one would expect the position and function of the Platonic concept of essence to still be subject to such grounding given Marcuse's framing, but this is conspicuously absent from his exposition.

The reason for this has to do with the deeper set of deficiencies revealed by Marcuse's framing, which themselves have to do with the overall interpretive apparatus of the essay, which is over-reliant on "expressive causality" or homology and ultimately subsumes its historical materialist elements under an idealist philosophy of history.<sup>10</sup> This appeared in the framing in terms of the *expression* of real human struggles and desires "in the derived forms of the philosophical tradition," but its centrality to Marcuse's analysis is demonstrated much more clearly by taking the interpretive apparatus as a whole as our object of examination. In this schema, the text of the history of philosophy is read on multiple levels, each of which can be categorized according to the primary philosophical methodology that is operative in it.

We can call the first level quasi-Heideggerian because it is where the lingering influence of a Heideggerian problematic—recall that Marcuse was a student of Heidegger—is most prominent. It is also the level on which the bulk of the interpretation of Plato's concept of essence is con-

---

further historical investigation, rather than theoretical or methodological assumptions brought to that material on the basis of high-level generalization.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the Althusserian critique of expressive causality and the subsumption of it under the critique of homology, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (Cornell University Press, 1981), 23–43. For the general conception of allegory and interpretive levels on which this analysis is based, see Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 29–32.

ducted. At this level, Marcuse reads Plato's concept of essence according to an altered version of the Heideggerean conception of metaphysics in which the primarily question is of the relationship between Being and beings, a relationship that is made possible by a transcendence of the "facticity" of beings.<sup>11</sup> For Marcuse, this transcendence does not take place on the basis of the "nihilation of the nothing," but instead on the basis of the "critical consciousness of bad facticity, of unrealized potentialities."<sup>12</sup> How the badness of facticity or the awareness of those unrealized potentialities is established for consciousness is not clarified, but presumably it has something to do with the seemingly inherent "quest for the ultimate unity, universality and truth of Being" and the "struggles and desires" that went into it, which formed a part of the framing discussed above. This ungrounded connection of Being to "authenticity" or potentiality, to "what should and can be," provides the interpretive code on the basis of which the changing function of the concept of essence in the other historical examples is understood, and on which the connection to the next two levels is established.<sup>13</sup>

We can call the second level the historical materialist level because it operates on the basis of the concept of the mode of production, although it does so according to an economically determined expressive causality that might incline us to label it "vulgar" historical materialism. This is the level at which the socio-historical determination of the concept of essence is read on the basis of changes to its position and function. It is this level of interpretation that generates the most interesting insights in the historical section of the essay, despite the limits of its expressive mechanism. In each case, changes in the function of the concept of essence are read first in terms of the division set up on the first level between bad facticity and potentiality, as embodying, distorting, displacing or eliminating the "critical gap" between them that was established in the the case of Plato, and then reread in terms of the homology between these changes and changes in the configuration of the forces and relations of

---

<sup>11</sup> See Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" ed. Dieter Thomä, trans. Ian Moore and Gregory Fried, *Philosophy Today* 62, no. 3 (2018): 733–51, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday20181024232>, for the conception of metaphysics referenced in this paragraph, especially 739–44. This focus on transcendence also explains the transcendent character of the "common content," which encompasses the key determinations that attach to Being in opposition to beings, and so must be subject to the transcendence that produces this division.

<sup>12</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 33. For the "nihilation of the nothing," see Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," 740.

<sup>13</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 33.

production.<sup>14</sup> This order of operations also helps explain the lack of an account of the social determination of the Platonic concept of essence, which sets the baseline on which this second level of interpretation relies, and so falls outside of its purview.

The third level can be labeled the quasi-Hegelian or idealist level because it operates on the basis of the concept of freedom, building on the readings of the previous two levels and rereading them in terms of freedom in order to construct a teleological metanarrative that resembles the Hegelian philosophy of history in its broad outlines. In this metanarrative, the “interest of freedom” is seen as the originating impulse and inner essence of the development of philosophy, and Marxism, or the “materialist doctrine of essence,” represents the culmination of that development insofar as it takes as its object the actualization of freedom—which has been made into a *real possibility* by the social conditions of the modern era.<sup>15</sup> It is on this third level that the grounding of the connection between true Being and potentiality that was missing from the perspective of the first level takes place. We can now see that the “interest of freedom” is what establishes the badness of facticity and the conscious awareness of unrealized potentiality, and so makes possible the fundamental metaphysical division between Being and beings on which Marcuse’s interpretation of the concept of essence is based. It is able to do so because, as the origin and inner essence of the concept of essence, it is posited as implicitly containing the seeds of the whole development in-itself by the meta-narrative constructed through the interpretive apparatus. This determination by the interpretive apparatus further disincentivizes any investigation of the origins or socio-historical determination of the Platonic concept of essence because such investigation might disturb its function as a pure origin and inner essence of the development as a whole.

It is the idealist philosophy of history constructed by the third level, and its subsumption of the historical materialist interpretation, based on the concept of the mode of production, under itself, that forms the most objectionable part of Marcuse’s overall position and causes the most distortion of both the historical material and the project of histor-

---

<sup>14</sup> Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” 34–7. For example, the positing of an absolute separation and externality between the two sides in the Medieval concept is understood as an expression of the relations of personal domination that characterized the feudal mode of production, and the subjectivization and displacement of the Cartesian concept of essence into the realm of logic and epistemology is understood as an expression of the individualization and (fetishized) subjection of those individuals to the conditions of production characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.

<sup>15</sup> Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” 48–9, 56, and 60.

ical explanation itself. At the same time, even without that subsumption, Marcuse's reliance on homology would have limited his ability to properly explain the socio-historical emergence and development of the concept of essence, even according to the determinations of the "materialist doctrine of essence" that he himself set out in the latter half of his essay.<sup>16</sup> In this latter section, he paints a more adequate picture of the principles of historical materialism, although they are still colored by their situation within the idealist and expressive interpretive frameworks of the overall exposition, and so they must be evaluated on a case by case basis as to their usefulness for our project.<sup>17</sup> Similarly the conclusions drawn must be called into question and reevaluated on the basis of concrete historical investigation.

To avoid the problems that prevented Marcuse from developing an adequate account of the socio-historical determination of essence, our investigation must rest on a thoroughly different methodological foundation from his—one whose basic impulses arise from the determinate negation of the abstract transcendence, formalism and idealist philosophy of history that subsumed and restricted the historical materialist elements that gave Marcuse's essay its original appeal. This means starting with the concrete socio-economic conditions themselves that gave rise to the concept of essence and any antecedents it may have had, rather than starting from presupposed conceptual determinations of that concept and interpreting them on the basis of a teleological meta-narrative or philosophy of history.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, it also means understanding those conditions in the context of a total social process centered around the mode(s) of production of concrete social formations and its transformation over time, and giving explanatory priority to the broadly economic elements that provide its foundation, while also respecting the relative autonomy of its various structural elements.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, this remains an interpretive scheme. It could not be otherwise. But it is one that is not centered on the *expression* of the content of one level in the content of another level, or on the subordination of the whole interpretive apparatus under the determinative closure of a master code, but rather on the reciprocal determination of relatively autonomous elements. Finally, it involves an active and dynamic suspension of the

<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 50–64.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 1 for a discussion of some of the relevant principles.

<sup>18</sup> My research has led me to locate this emergence not with Platonic theory of Forms, but with the substance monism of the early Pre-Socratic philosophers.

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed exposition of what I mean by the broadly economic and its foundational place in the overall mode of production, see Appendix 1.

presuppositions we all bring into historical interpretation in favor of a dialectical surrender to the object, but one which does not entail avoiding the responsibility of simultaneously *thinking* that object.<sup>20</sup> Taken together, these form the basic impulses that animate the conception of historical materialism I develop in this study. A more detailed elaboration of this conception can be found in Appendix 1, but, as Hegel reminds us, the true elaboration can only be found in the unfolding of the project as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.2. Sohn-Rethel & Historical Materialism

Another prominent Marxist figure who has attempted to address the social determination of Ancient Greek philosophy is Alfred Sohn-Rethel. In his book *Manual and Intellectual Labor* Sohn-Rethel, like Marcuse, attempts to construct a grand historical narrative that explains the origins of a central feature of bourgeois thought—this time the epistemological foundations of “scientific cognition” as a whole and trace it back to its socio-historical foundations, which he locates in the “exchange abstraction” and, more generally, in the division between manual and intellectual labor. Also like Marcuse, Sohn-Rethel does this in order to say something about the overcoming of capitalism, this time in terms of the overcoming of said division between manual and intellectual labor, rather than in terms of the realization of freedom. In examining the work of Sohn Rethel, we will find that it is plagued by many of the same problems as Marcuse’s attempt. Our old friends formalism, homology, transcendence and idealism will all rear their heads once again, although in enough of a different manner as to remain instructive. If nothing else, this examination will serve to differentiate the methodological principles at work in this essay and the questions it attempts to answer from those of a superficially similar, but fundamentally different project that it might be associated with.

The first point to make about *Manual and Intellectual Labor* is that despite its historical materialist dressing, Sohn-Rethel’s project is completely enveloped by the Kantian problematic it takes as its object of critique. He starts by saying that he accepts Kant’s premise that “the principles of knowledge fundamental to the quantifying sciences cannot

---

<sup>20</sup> For more on this process of active surrender to the object, see Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 37 (21.43) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1–4.

be traced to the physical and sensorial capacity of experience.”<sup>22</sup> But, like many before him, he is unsatisfied with the way Kant grounds this division between the *a priori* and *a posteriori* in the transcendental unity of apperception, which is itself presented as an ungrounded source of “transcendental spontaneity.”<sup>23</sup> He argues that the fault in Kant’s project lies in his unwillingness to pursue his inquiry to the point of locating a “historical origin of our logical ability to construct mathematical hypotheses and the elements contributing to them.”<sup>24</sup> His project in *Intellectual and Manual Labor* is to show that this historical origin lies in the “exchange abstraction” which becomes “converted into the conceptual structure of the abstract intellect.”<sup>25</sup> In conceiving his project this way, Sohn-Rethel retains the Kantian conception of scientific cognition—which is a product of determinate circumstances corresponding to a specific phase of the capitalist mode of production (and of the development of science)—and reifies it as the transcendental structure of “abstract intellect” and scientific thinking in general. Without going into the details of the many distortions of Marx’s analysis of the commodity form that result from this, I think it is sufficient here to say that this leads him into a formalism that is similar to Marcuse’s insofar as his appropriation of both Marx and the historical evidence are always already structured by this presupposition.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Haymarket Books, 2021), 31.

<sup>23</sup> Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 31–2.

<sup>24</sup> Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 31–2. This reduction of all the content of the Kantian *a priori* to a mathematical basis most likely rests on a common faulty interpretation of the role of math in Kant’s system (one typically derived from a reading of Kant’s analytic presentation of the apriority of space as the form of outer intuition in the *Prolegomena* which ignores the synthetic presentation of the apriority of space in the *Critique*). For a critique of this interpretation see Lisa Shabel, “Kant’s ‘Argument from Geometry,’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42, no. 2 (2004): 195–215, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2004.0034>. This reduction is characteristic of Sohn-Rethel’s presentation, which almost exclusively focuses on the quantitative and mathematical elements of philosophical and scientific cognition, which allows him to reduce thought, or “abstract intellect”, to a form more easily assimilable to the abstract quantitative determinations of the “exchange abstraction.”

<sup>25</sup> Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Some telling examples of this are Sohn-Rethel’s dismissal of value as having “no thought content of its own, no definable logical substance” and “bear[ing] no inherent reference to labor” (Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 40–1), his dismissal of the importance of the landed aristocracy and overemphasis on the role of circulation as the primary source of wealth in Archaic and Classical Greece, along with his characterization of this circulatory wealth as “merchants and users capital” (Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 83 & 85), and his claim that the exchange abstraction is founded on “social

In addition to the formalism of his ahistorical conception of abstract intellect, Sohn-Rethel's Kantian problematic also leads him to formulate his conception of "the exchange abstraction" and its "laws" or "formal structure" on the basis of its necessary conditions of possibility. At first, he attempts to give his derivation of the structuring concepts of abstract intellect a materialist veneer by arguing that they derive from the *act* of exchange in its opposition to the *act* of use. But, as Jameson reminds us, historical materialism "does not assert the primacy of matter so much as it insists on an ultimate determination by the mode of production," a reminder which equally applies to activity abstracted from its mode of production as it does matter.<sup>27</sup> It also gradually becomes clear that it is not the act of exchange itself so much as the "social postulates" or "fictions" that underlie the "exchange abstraction" (such as the postulate that "no physical change should occur in the commodities" during the act of exchange) that provide the actual basis on which the concepts are derived and "converted" into philosophical concepts. These postulates are conceived as having nothing to do with "statements of fact," but rather, "are norms which commodity exchange has to obey to be possible."<sup>28</sup> It should be clear to anyone who has read the first chapter of *Capital* that this has nothing to do with the form-analysis undertaken by Marx there, in which it is the *relationship* established between two commodities in the act of exchange—in which one commodity is posited as the material embodiment of the value of the other commodity, which is itself thereby posited as having a value independent of its own material body and qualitative existence—that posits value as an abstract determination of the commodity, not any social postulates that function as transcendental conditions of the possibility

---

postulates" and thus the concepts derived from it are normative and able to assume an independent logical existence separated from "statements of fact" (Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 56–7). In all of these cases, the evidence drawn upon is distorted in order to strengthen the isomorphism between commodity exchange (and the societies in which it took place) and the Kantian structure of cognition as divided between *a priori* and *a posteriori* (and the capitalist relations of production under which it was formulated).

<sup>27</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 45

<sup>28</sup> For the elements of the exchange abstraction as social postulates and conditions of the possibility of the act of exchange, as well as their fictional character, see Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 56–7 and 45, respectively. He does seem to recognize the incompatibility of this idealist procedure with his purported materialism in places, such as when he tries to reground the postulate of exemption from material change in human action by saying that "changes caused by human beings which infringe this postulate are outlawed by the police authority presiding in the market," but it is unclear who or what this "police authority" is or whether it corresponds to an actual and invariant condition of commodity exchange, and so falls flat.

of that act.<sup>29</sup> Once again, we see that it is the relationship of reciprocal determination in which elements stand with respect to each other that forms the basis of historical materialist explanation, rather than reliance on a transcendent(al) content determined by a necessity that stems from the presuppositions of the theorist.

Neither does “the physical act of transfer,” which Sohn-Rethel puts forward as the pseudo-materialist base upon which these social postulates are supposed to operate, play any part in Marx’s analysis of the commodity form.<sup>30</sup> It is this pseudo-materialist base that is critical in enabling the “conversion” of the concepts derived from the social postulates into concepts of philosophical or scientific cognition that take nature as their object. Sohn-Rethel argues that it is through the operation of these postulates in the “physical act of transfer”, that “the negation of the natural and material physicality [of the act itself] constitutes the positive reality of the abstract social physicality of the exchange process,” which thereby constitutes “a kind of abstract nature.”<sup>31</sup> It is this combination of the abstraction derived from the social postulates and the physicality of the act of exchange that allows the “conversion” into philosophical-scientific concepts to happen and establishes the validity of these concepts in their reference to nature.<sup>32</sup>

It is here that we can finally begin to understand the otherwise strange and highly idiosyncratic decision to ground the account of real abstraction in the act of exchange considered as physical transfer and the social postulates considered as necessary conditions of possibility—a conception that one would be hard pressed to derive from the works of Marx taken on their own. It is the typically Kantian concern with establishing the validity of the non-empirical concepts involved in mathematical and scientific cognition in relation to experience that best makes sense of the motivation for this decision.<sup>33</sup> Without it, there would be no reason to “supplement” Marx in the way Sohn-Rethel does by dividing the process of abstraction involved in exchange into an *a priori* portion that involves conditions of possibility and *a posteriori* portion that imparts it with its own (abstract) physicality.

In order to avoid the formalism and dualism that Sohn-Rethel is led

<sup>29</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1990), 139–54.

<sup>30</sup> Sohn-Rethel, *Manual and Intellectual Labor*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Sohn-Rethel, *Manual and Intellectual Labor*, 47

<sup>32</sup> Sohn-Rethel, *Manual and Intellectual Labor*, 58

<sup>33</sup> Sohn-Rethel indicates the importance of this concern for his investigation in the sections on “Reification at the Root of the Intellect” and “Laws of Nature”; Sohn-Rethel, *Manual and Intellectual Labor*, 60–2.

into by his Kantian problematic, in this essay I will be focusing not on the emergence of some transcendental structure or general mode of thinking (whether this be conceived in terms of “scientific thought,” “abstract intellect,” “philosophy,” or “rationality”), but rather on the emergence of a determinate concept, abstract substance, as it arises in the determinate circumstances in which it was developed, and insofar as it represents the first clear formulation of the opposition between being and an abstract substratum thought to posit it and constitute its truth—without assuming that this recognizability entails a continuity in with later formulations of essence in terms of its meaning or function. This means to bracket off those other questions, not because I don’t think there is anything to them—I suspect that there are actually multiple relatively independent processes taking place on different time scales, but do not discount the possibility of a significant and transformative convergence of some of these processes in Archaic and Classical Greece that corresponds with the purported object of the above theories—but because I don’t think approaching such a question in such broad strokes is productive for understanding the actual historical developments under consideration. It is only by paying attention to the intricate and particular details of historical processes, and situating them within the context of the total social process that they form moments of, and of the determinate mode(s) of production on the basis of which that process takes place, that these questions can be answered without running the risk of falling into the schematic and ahistorical kind of thinking that overtook Sohn-Rethel. Unlike Sohn-Rethel, I do not think that there is a singular key to unlocking the mysteries of the social determination of abstract thought, and so, to sail through the narrow passage between the Scylla of this kind of reductionism and the Charybdis of losing oneself in the immensity of the details, broader questions must be sacrificed (at least temporarily) in order to preserve the seaworthiness of our explanatory vessel.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> This also means bracketing for the moment the question of Greek mathematics and its relation to both earlier mathematical traditions and philosophy, although I do think there is something distinctive about greek math and it does have something to do with the same processes that led to the emergence of Greek philosophy, with which it seems to be intertwined (at least biographically in the lives of the early philosophers). In terms of changes in the form of thought, it seems to me that the most fruitful angle from which to tackle this topic would involve investigating the development of the judgment and the syllogism as conceptual-linguistic forms. I hope to build off of the present study by pursuing both of these lines of inquiry in future pieces.

## 2. The Pre-History of the Concept of Essence

### 2.1. Bardic Truth and its Mode of Production

As we saw above, in order to understand the emergence of a recognizable concept of essence in Pre-Socratic Monism, we must situate it within the total social process that its development constituted a moment of.<sup>35</sup> This means looking back at its conceptual antecedents and the mode of production in which they were situated before moving on to the changes in that mode of production that conditioned the emergence of essence in the thought of the Pre-Socratics, which we will examine in section 2.2. In this section, I will content myself with a brief summary of the kind of society that existed in Greece at the earlier pole of this historical process, in order to then examine the mythico-poetic system of representation that corresponded to it. It was in this social and representational context that one of the primary determinations of essence identified by Marcuse, truth (*aletheia*), had been situated before changes in the mode of production led to its re-configuration into the form it would take in the concept of essence developed by the Pre-Socratic Monists.

In the Homeric poems, we can see both poles of this process of development—despite the archaizing perspective of the bardic author. For now, our focus must be on the earlier pole, which was characterized by a mode of production in which commodity production and exchange were relatively marginal and slavery had not yet taken on the central place in the mode of exploitation that it would in the later period.<sup>36</sup> In the communities of this period, the class structure of society was instead centered on external appropriation of the surplus of other communities through warfare and raiding and the internal appropriation of surplus in the form of tribute on the basis of the role that warrior-aristocrats played in the necessary communal labors of religion and self-defense.<sup>37</sup> The most important point here is that within the community the mode of surplus appropriation was still, to some extent, based on the social role of the warrior aristocracy in the necessary surplus labor on which the survival of the community as a whole—and the independent production of the individual households that together constituted that community—depended. This is true not only of the martial activities that directly ensured the survival of the community, but also of

<sup>35</sup> For a more extensive discussion of what this means, see Appendix 1

<sup>36</sup> See Appendix 2, 260-266 for a more extensive discussion of the role of slavery in the two periods and a critique of Finley's conflation of them in *The World of Odysseus*.

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix 2, 253-260 for a more in depth look at the different elements of the mode of exploitation in these communities.

the religious activities that cohered the community *as a community* and mediated the reproduction of the social relations of production through which the direct production of the means of life was carried out. In this sense, the warrior-aristocracy provided the unity of the community as such, and they did so on the basis of personal authority and a network of ritually institutionalized relationships, which guaranteed the sanctity of that authority through the supersensible power of the gods.<sup>38</sup>

The bard was another figure involved in this system of divine sanction, and it is in the religious structure of Homeric society that connects the bard and the warrior aristocrat—and in its mytho-poetic representation—that we can most clearly see the place of truth in Pre-Archaic Greek social formations, in which it had a different content and set of conceptual relations than it would come to have in PSM. The bard was seen as able to imbue action and speech with divine sanction, though of a particular type: the sanction of the Muses.<sup>39</sup> The Muses were the divine personification of *mousa*, sung speech, which was connected with “laudatory speech”.<sup>40</sup> They were also portrayed as the daughters of Memory (*Mnēmosynē*) and, with their power to know “all things that were, things to come and things past,” they “claim[ed] the privilege of ‘speaking the truth.’”<sup>41</sup> Detienne argues that this sung speech allowed the bard to “enter into contact with the other world, and his memory granted him the power to ‘decipher the invisible.’”<sup>42</sup> It is this contact with the invisible world, facilitated by divine, oracular memory, that allowed the bard, like the Muses, to speak truth, to confer divine sanction on his

<sup>38</sup> A possible explanation of why the authority that guaranteed the sanctity of the customs and rituals through which social relations were mediated took the form of supersensible or divine power is suggested by Marx in the section of the *Grundrisse* on pre-capitalist social forms, where he says that in early communal forms of society, both the social and objective presuppositions of direct appropriation through the labor process “are not themselves the *product* of labor, but appear as its natural or *divine* presuppositions.” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin, 1993), 472. With this in mind, we can understand the need for divine authority to guarantee personal authority and the institutionalized relationships it was embedded in as a result of the fact that the social conditions of both (such as custom, kinship structures, common language etc) are *presuppositions* that do not stem from the activity of the individuals that make up the living community themselves.

<sup>39</sup> Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Zone Books, 1999), 39–42.

<sup>40</sup> Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (University of Michigan Press, 1951), 1.70, quoted in Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 42–3; Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (University of Michigan Press, 1951), 28, 32, and 38, quoted in Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 42–5.

<sup>42</sup> Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 43.

words of praise and blame, and the deeds they referred to, most importantly the deeds of the heroic warrior-aristocrat.<sup>43</sup> It is through the bard that the *kleos* (glory) of the warrior was thought to reach not just the ears of the community and future generations, but up to the heavens.<sup>44</sup> In this way the bard played a role in solidifying the divine sanction that ensures the social sanctity of the institutions centered around the warrior-aristocracy.

Should we understand this social function of the bard, in which the truth of their statements was embedded, as merely an ideological support for the rule of the warrior-aristocrat? This was clearly one aspect of the bard's function, but even it must be taken in the context of a social situation in which that rule was based on the role of the aristocrat in the necessary social labor that ensured the reproduction of the community. Furthermore, the bards themselves clearly played an independent role in that necessary labor insofar as their praise and blame, as well as the broader narrative context in which it was allocated, did not merely sanction the rule of warrior-aristocracy, but also preserved and transmitted the customs and broader cultural heritage through which social relations, both within a community and between communities in a broader network of alliance and obligation, were mediated. This is the function that secured their truth, that gave it its meaning, that vested it in them as bearers of that function, and that was expressed as an oracular connection with a divine world in which memory provides access equally to past, present, and future as elements of an atemporal 'plane of truth.'

At this point, it is useful to compare this mythico-religious conception of truth with the determination of truth as it would appear once it had become situated within the conceptual relations of PSM. In the latter, truth will have taken on the determination that Marcuse identifies with it of establishing a hierarchical relation between levels of reality in which one level is taken to be in some sense more "real" than another. It will also have assumed the connection to unity, universality, and abstraction that Marcuse posits as characteristic of the concept of essence. In the earlier bardic conception, despite significant continuities (which we will return to shortly) the overall determination of truth is different on both scores. On the first, while it does appear to distinguish between two different levels of reality, and does do so to some extent—i.e. between the divine, atemporal "plane of truth" and the mortal realm—its real opposition is with oblivion (*lēthē*), and its function is primarily to dis-

<sup>43</sup> Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 46.

tinguish, within the mortal realm, and through the action of divine memory, that which is to be preserved and elevated up to the undying realm of the gods from that which does not merit preservation and so will be forgotten and sink down into oblivion.<sup>45</sup> This is a different sorting process from the one involved in the truth of PSM, one that operates on the basis of moral categories (praiseworthiness, blameworthiness, glory, etc.) rather than the logical or metaphysical categories of the latter conception (unity, universality, abstraction). Even the “unseen world” that the truth of the bards provides access to is not seen so much as underlying the mortal world as being parallel to and in constant interaction with it.

Still, the similarities are significant. Most importantly, bardic truth does posit a division between different planes of reality, one sensible and mortal, and the other supersensible and in some way atemporal. This atemporality has a certain ambivalence between the senses of *immortality* as that which does not die and *permanence* as that which is invariant or eternal. Both of these senses can be seen as related to the social function of the bard. The first relates to the distinctly personal and subjective aspects of this function. It is the mechanism of oral transmission and its characteristic objects (warrior-aristocrats and their words and deeds) that determine atemporality as immortality, as an elevation of particular elements of the concrete mortal world to a special status in which their temporal nature is not so much removed as infinitely extended by the memory of the bard and the act of preservation and transmission through the process of telling and retelling.<sup>46</sup> The second sense is more properly atemporal, in that it indicates an exteriority to the flow of time, rather than merely being infinitely extended out into that flow. This is the sense that attaches to the plane of truth itself, in which past, present and future are seen as simultaneously accessible, and, in a sense, undifferentiated, or at least cut off from their temporal ordering. It is not the personal-subjective aspects of the bards function that underlie this second sense of atemporality—and so also the basic separation between the planes that lies at the heart of the determination of truth—but the

---

<sup>45</sup> Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 47–52.

<sup>46</sup> As a bad infinity, this process of telling and retelling cannot realize the immortality that it ascribes to its objects. Instead it must inscribe them within the perpetual ought of its own process of reproduction, the instability of which, along with its dependence on continuous reinscription within the living community, probably contributes to the porosity of the boundary between the “unseen world” and the mortal realm, although this is clearly also a product of the need to posit more active divine intervention to ensure the sanctity of ritually inscribed relations whose purely interpersonal basis would leave them relatively insecure.

social aspect, or the way in which the bard relates to the reproduction of the social totality, that does so.

In preserving and transmitting the customs and broader cultural heritage in which the social relations of production and reproduction were embedded, the bard reproduces the necessary social *presuppositions* of the social formation. As presuppositions, these stand outside the sensuous activity of the community as conditions of communal production that are not themselves produced by the community. They thus stand outside the normal process of becoming that characterizes the everyday life of the community, and bring together past (as pre-existent), present (as conditions of the current existence of the living community) and future (as conditions of the continuing reproduction of the community) in their separation from that process. This can be seen as the foundation of the second sense of atemporality as being outside the flow of time, as well as of the basic separation between a sensuous and temporal plane of reality and a supersensuous and atemporal one on which the bardic conception of truth as a whole rests.

Despite the otherwise general reconfiguration of the concept of truth in the time between the bardic conception and that of PSM, in which the interactive parallelism of the earlier conception became a foundational relationship based on logical-metaphysical rather than moral categories, the basic division on the basis of which the latter conception continued to be structured, between a sensible and temporal realm and a supersensible and atemporal one, can be seen to have already been present in the earlier conception. How should we explain this continuity? Given the basis of the earlier form of the division in the social function of the bard of reproducing the necessary presuppositions of the social formation as a whole, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the persistence of this division was based on the persistence of this social function and to posit that the changes in its organization have their basis in changes in the operation of that function. If we then look at the historical evidence, we do in fact find that this function both persists and undergoes significant change. As we shall see in more detail below, in the later period the impersonal institution of monetary exchange had come to replace the relational institutions of the earlier period as the primary form of social mediation on which the unity of the social formation as such was based, and so also it had itself become the primary social presupposition on which social production rested.<sup>47</sup> With this transformation, the

---

<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that custom or religion stopped playing this function entirely—their continued existence attests to their continued functionality—but simply that they no longer occupied the primary position which they had in the earlier relations of production.

bard, as a personal, subjective bearer of the function of reproducing this presupposition, was replaced by money itself as an objective bearer of that same function. Simultaneously, truth became detached from its connection to the social function of an individual with whose speech it was coextensive and began to take on the determinations of the money form, with its division between a concrete material embodiment and an abstract value underlying it, and its role as universal equivalent that provides unity to the diverse commodities related to it in terms of their value.

As we shall see in the following sections, the emergence of essence in PSM and its relation to the money form is more complicated than this correspondence would suggest. For one, the objectification of the primary social presuppositions of the changing mode of production meant the dissolution of the direct relationship between speech and the social function of reproducing those presuppositions. It is this direct relationship that grounds the truth of bardic speech, and without it, any assertion of the continuing relevance of that social function to the determination of truth runs the risk of being reduced to mere homology. Relatedly, the correspondence on its own is unsatisfactory insofar as it does not explain why the objectification of the social preconditions of the process of production resulted in a transformation of the determination of truth rather than its abandonment as the social system in which it was embedded collapsed. In fact, there is a divergent intellectual tendency among the Greek aristocracy that did abandon the concept of truth after the collapse of the social conditions of its mytho-religious formulation—the intellectual lineage leading from Simonides of Ceos down to the sophists and beyond.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the early philosophers, in whose thought the concept of essence emerged, did maintain a degree of continuity with the older conception of truth, and it was precisely on the grounds of the correspondence under discussion here that they did so. This continuity of the correspondence is indicative, and can direct us in the right direction, but it cannot be taken as an explanation on its own. The questions now are why the early philosophers maintained this continuity, and in what ways (and to what extent) were the continuities and differences in their conception of truth determined by the objectification discussed here. To answer these questions, we must turn to the historical context in which both this objectification and the emergence of the concept of essence took place.

---

<sup>48</sup> For the relation between Simonedes and the Sophists, see Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 107–19.

## 2.2. The Crisis of Aristocracy

Filling out the tapestry whose warp has been laid out above means turning to the transformations wrought by commercialization, military reform and the consolidation of a slave mode of production in the development of Greek social formations between the Early Iron Age and the Archaic Period.<sup>49</sup> The reciprocal dynamic between commercialization and the changing mode of exploitation played out over a number of centuries, and culminated in 1) the crystallization of the money form out of the process of exchange and 2) consolidation of the mode of exploitation around private appropriation by a landowning aristocracy of the surplus produced by unfree labor.<sup>50</sup> This process of development is explored in further detail in Appendix 2. For now, suffice it to say that around the 7th century BCE, these processes had reached a critical point in which their effects, especially those of monetization, began to ripple out into society broadly and at an increasing pace, which was then further accelerated by the invention of coinage.<sup>51</sup> It is these effects which characterize to a large extent the profound crises and transformations of the Archaic period, including the development of Pre-Socratic monism.

Even the most noted change of this period, the development of the *polis*, can be seen to be a result of this process of commoditization and monetization. In Appendix 2, I describe how the centers of concentrated settlement that would develop into the first *poleis* were themselves nodes of long distance trade and the expanding commodity relations that accompany it, as well as the role of this commercial expansion in the centering of slavery within the primary process of production. The *polis*, as an urban area that incorporated its surrounding countryside, on which it was dependent for subsistence, was made possible by these same developments.

That the typical *polis* was centered around its *agora*, or marketplace, is indicative, but even more decisive is the composition of the *poleis*, or more specifically, of the *astē*. Their primary residents were 1) aristocrats enabled to live away from their land holdings by the surplus labor extracted from slaves, serfs, or debt bondsmen 2) craftsmen whose

<sup>49</sup> The periodization scheme I am using here is based on the one in Alex Knodell, *Societies in Transition in Early Greece: An Archeological History* (University of California Press, 2021), 7.

<sup>50</sup> For the concept of unfree labor in Ancient Greece, see G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Cornell University Press, 1981), 133–74.

<sup>51</sup> On this last point, see Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

livelihoods were primarily dependent on selling commodities to those aristocrats in exchange for the products of that same surplus labor, and 3) the urban poor who begged or sold their labor-power to the aristocrats or to the *polis* itself for a wage.<sup>52</sup> In a *polis* like Athens, even the funding of public institutions was derived in large part from the dedications, *eisphorai* and *liturgoi* of the aristocrats, in other words from the proceeds of selling the products of the surplus labor appropriated on their estates as commodities (and, even in the earliest cases of temple dedications, these products were exchanged for (often mass produced) objects made of metal).<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the *polis* as a whole was a social form mediated by monetized impersonal relations. The city itself, the *astu*, which formed the center of the *polis* and gave it its unity, was determined as a site of commodity production, exchange, and consumption above all else. Its development was to a large extent a result of the increasing interdependence brought on by the increasing division of labor that arose and expanded along with the expansion of commodity production and exchange, but it was equally made possible by the changes in the mode of exploitation that accompanied this commercialization, which centered the private exploitation of unfree labor on the estates of aristocratic landowners as the primary mode of surplus appropriation on which the subsistence of the aristocracy—and the existence of the broader social formation as such—was based.

In contrast to the personal authority that gave unity to the earlier social formations discussed above, and the institutions of personal reciprocity that mediated social relations within and between them, the monetized exchange relations that formed the primary basis of social mediation within the *polis* were impersonal and given objective unity by money itself as the universal embodiment of commodity-producing human labor. As the universal equivalent, money is separated off from the diverse mass of commodities as the material body in which each and all of them represent their value. It homogenizes the diverse particular forms of human activity whose products it is exchanged for. When a commodity producer exchanges their product for money, they exchange

<sup>52</sup> See De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 114–33, 208–26, 269–78; Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Updated Edition (University of California Press, 1999), 123–49. It is the combination of De Ste. Croix's characterization of these groups and emphasis on the importance of unfree labor in the mode of exploitation with Finley's emphasis on the consumptive nature of ancient cities and the importance of the landed aristocracy in that consumption that best allows us to see this point.

<sup>53</sup> For the *eisphorai* and *liturgoi*, see Michael Gagarin, *Democratic Law in Classical Athens* (University of Texas Press, 2020), Chapter 1, Kindle. For the mass production of temple dedications, see Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 102–9.

it for the embodiment of human labor in the abstract, for a commodity that has the exclusive function of representing the value of all other commodities. In this act of exchange, they posit their concrete, particular, private labor as abstract, universal, social labor. To the extent that a member of society produces commodities that they exchange for money, they posit their labor as social and qualitatively equal with all the other particular forms of labor that express their values in money. They posit their own labor as a fraction of the total social labor, but at the same time as social only insofar as it is exchanged for money, that is to say only indirectly. In this way the money form privatizes at the same time as it socializes, obscuring the social character of the productive activity of the members of society by embodying it as an external object, and one which can be possessed by an individual.

This means that social mediation lost its interpersonal basis to the extent that it became monetized. If a man had money, he didn't need a patronymic and lineage, nor loyalty, nor customary obligation, nor reputation, nor martial prowess to exercise social power or accumulate its trappings; he could pay for whatever product of the labor of others he wanted or needed and they wouldn't ask who he was or why he wanted it, so long as they received money in return. To command an army no longer required one to inhabit a defined place in a hierarchy of privileges and obligations defined by honor and heredity but merely to have enough money to pay mercenaries to do your bidding, and this is how many Tyrants usurped power in the Archaic period and beyond.<sup>54</sup> As I noted at the end of the last section, it also meant that the formerly customary and interpersonal social presuppositions of the production and reproduction of the community became increasingly objectified in money itself, which gave unity to the now increasingly indirect and increasingly complex sociality of the different labors involved in the production and reproduction of the social formation as such.

These developments resulted in a series of acute social crises that spread out across the Greek Mediterranean as the traditional social forms that undergirded the personal authority and class cohesion of the warrior-aristocracy were undermined. These crises began as crises of the warrior-aristocracy in the face of changing social conditions that then turned into general social crises—to a large extent as a result of the aristocratic responses to those very conditions. We already see this state of crisis expressed in the Homeric epics, both of which revolve around

---

<sup>54</sup> De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 279–83.

crises of aristocratic reciprocity and the institutions that mediated it.<sup>55</sup> It is these institutions themselves and the aristocratic ideals associated with them that explicitly frame the crises that animate the poems. The greed of Agamemnon and the Suitors can be seen as results of the new incentives for accumulation that accompany commercialization and that now outweighed the traditional imperatives for the leader to make a fair distribution or the guests to respect the hospitality of their host. Inversely, the refusal of Achilles to accept anything in exchange for his honor shows the unsuitability of the heroic ideal to the developing forms of social mediation.<sup>56</sup> Finally, although there are other examples that could be given, the need for divine intervention to prevent the spiraling out of retribution and blood feud as a result of Odysseus' decidedly heroic and honorable killing of the suitors shows the unsustainability of such forms of retribution in an increasingly (commercially) integrated society that had increasingly little place for the interpersonal violence that surrounded the warrior-aristocrat and which in many ways constituted his distinguishing feature.<sup>57</sup>

The Homeric response to the crisis laid out in the poems is characteristic of the overall aristocratic response to crisis in its tendency to lionize the outmoded institutions and values that previously upheld and legitimized aristocratic rule while ignoring or degrading the elements of change that undercut its viability. In a sense the aristocracy as a class acted in similar fashion to Achilles or Odysseus, obstinately trying to hold on to their honor, to the system of values and institutions in which their power and their way of life were embedded, in the face of a reality that ensured that this attempt would lead them to ruin. This impulse to double down on the traditional ideals and modes of conduct in the face of changing circumstances is part of what spelled trouble for the hereditary aristocracy in the context of a social world in which the development of commodity relations had created more integrated social formations with new incentives for accumulation of individual wealth, and possibly had also reduced the tolerance of the lower classes, especially the upper strata of these lower classes, for being treated as targets of appropriation rather than partners to an equal exchange.<sup>58</sup>

The fuller extent of this dynamic comes into view when we look at

<sup>55</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> This divine intervention is also indicative insofar as it is the gods, those supreme guarantors of aristocratic rule and superiority, who the poet ultimately relies on to resolve the seemingly insoluble contradictions arising from the system of honor and retribution in the mortal world.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 178. Aristotle also gives an example of this dynamic in

what we know of the early laws of Athens and the circumstances that gave birth to them. The homicide law of Drako is clearly a response to the untenability of inter-elite blood feuds and the general impression we have of the seventh century BCE is that it was riven by crises arising from this kind of violent inter-elite strife within the hereditary aristocracy and between them and newer claimants to wealth and power.<sup>59</sup> It is also clear from the laws of Solon and his description of the crisis that prompted his intervention that this kind of inter-elite conflict had broadened out into a general breakdown of social order in which the type of raiding we saw as a key part of the surplus appropriation of the old warrior-aristocracy became common *within the polis*, leading to the enslavement of citizens and accelerating the impoverishment of the small peasants and their growing indebtedness.<sup>60</sup> We should see this internal breakout of violent appropriation of land, people and goods as the one of the final obstinate spasms of the declining warrior-aristocracy in the face of their changing circumstances. Indeed, the Solonian legislation was the first in a series of upheavals and constitutional changes that registered and expanded the power of the *demos*, the lower classes, and laid the foundations for democracy.

At the same time, this violent spasm was not just the death rattle of an old form of aristocracy, it was also the final labor pang in the birth of a new form. One of its most significant functions was to allow the consolidation of land in the hands of the aristocrats through direct violence, debt and the exercise of political power, thereby establishing the basis of their continuing supremacy within the emerging relations of exploitation.

Solon's laws also abolished the *hektemoroi*, the situation in which a portion of the population had to pay one-sixth part of their product to others. Harris argues that this did not represent the abolition of debt or the ending of a type of serfdom, as has been traditionally argued,

---

the *Politics*, when he describes the way the ruling family of the hereditary aristocracy of Mytilene, the Penthilidae, used to go around beating people over the head with clubs, until they were attacked in turn by a certain Megacles who took offense to this behavior. Aristotle, *Politics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 2014), 2082.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Federica Carugati, "Athens Before the Crisis," in *Creating a Constitution: Law, Democracy and Growth in Ancient Athens* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 23–4. Solon too can be seen to be concerned not so much with supporting the lower classes as with curbing those aristocratic practices which threatened the stability of the community as such, as argued by Harris in Edward M. Harris, "A Solution to the Riddle of the *Seisachtheia*," in *The Development of the Polis in Archaic Greece*, ed. Lynette G. Mitchell and P.J. Rhodes (Routledge, 1997), 111.

<sup>60</sup> Harris, "A New Solution to the Riddle of the *Seisachtheia*," 106.

but rather the prohibition of tribute payments like those seen in the Homeric epics, but which had become formalized into a system of fixed payments.<sup>61</sup> If this is correct, then it would represent an even more explicit sweeping away of the last vestiges of the traditional mode of exploitation of the warrior-aristocracy. Whether this represents the abolition of debt, the ending of a serf-like system or the abolition of tribute payments, it—coupled with the concentration of landed property in aristocratic hands, the increased legal protections and expansion of the scope of the courts, and the ban on enslavement of Athenian citizens—would have cleared the way for the consolidation of the mode of production around the commercialized polis—where dispossessed peasants would have had to have gone and become artisans, beggars or hired laborers (outcomes encouraged by other elements of the laws attributed to Solon, such as banning the export of grain and requiring fathers to teach their sons a trade)—on the basis of the aristocratic exploitation of slave labor on large landed estates in the countryside.<sup>62</sup>

It is also worth noting in connection with this that Solon made wealth—defined by agricultural output—the primary criteria for political participation, which likely expanded the base of that participation to certain upper-middle strata who had previously been excluded, even if the distinctions between the ‘classes’ were fairly fine and all referred to owners of substantial amounts of property, as Osborne argues.<sup>63</sup> With these changes—already developing before the Solonian reforms and continuing to be given further definition after, but for which the Solonian crisis and its purported solution represented a decisive shift—we see how the death throes of the old warrior-aristocracy, and the aristocratic reaction against them, led to their transformation into an aristocracy defined by ownership of the primary means of production (land) and the exploitation of slave labor.

Across the Greek Mediterranean, the primary agents in the overthrow of the old aristocratic political order were a series of figures known as tyrants (among whom some count Solon himself, although he was somewhat unusual in being appointed to resolve the civil strife in Athens rather than seizing power by force). The tyrants were not just agents but also expressions of the crisis of aristocracy—and of the class struggle that it was enmeshed with. They often rose to power using the new means made available to them by the process of commercialization

---

<sup>61</sup> Harris, “A New Solution to the Riddle of the *Seisachtheia*,” 103–11.

<sup>62</sup> On the other Solonian Laws, see Carugati, “Athens Before the Crisis,” 24.

<sup>63</sup> Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making: 1200–497 BC*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2009), 208.

and the conflict generated by the exhaustion of traditional modes of aristocratic power. They played aristocratic factions and clans off each other, took up the causes of the burgeoning middle strata of medium sized landowners and larger landowners excluded from the hereditary aristocracy's monopoly on political power (some of whom probably derived their wealth from commercial activities before using it to buy land), played on the discontent among the lower strata of small and dispossessed peasants, hired mercenaries to back their coups, and bought off important people and segments of the population either directly or through public expenditure. Many of these means were based directly on money as a new impersonal form of social power that could be accumulated by an individual and used to purchase things (status, good will, military forces) traditionally reserved for those who had personal authority issuing from their place in a system of defined social roles and obligations. Others were based on the conditions of class struggle associated with large-scale shifts in social relations produced by both commercialization and the consolidation of a slave mode of production. It was these conditions that were decisive for the tyrants writ large and that defined their overall historical role in breaking the political control of the hereditary warrior-aristocracy and expanding the class base of political participation.<sup>64</sup>

Along with commercialization, changes in the mode of exploitation, and the class struggle that accompanied these, the final major factor that drove the crisis of aristocracy in the Archaic was a shift in the organization and conduct of warfare known as the Hoplite Revolution. Though the orthodox position that a revolution in the conduct of warfare—in which the adoption of the hoplite panoply and phalanx tactics led to the increasing importance of a middling stratum of independent farmers in the composition of Greek armies starting in the 7th century BCE, and, as a result, to the increasing political and social power of this middling stratum—remains controversial, and continues to be challenged in many of its details, Hanson persuasively argues that it holds up in its broad strokes.<sup>65</sup> This “revolution” would have displaced the traditional warrior-aristocracy from its central position in the necessary communal labor of warfare, thereby further undermining the traditional base of their position within the class structure of their social formations and so of the legitimacy of their rule. Combined with the other factors dis-

---

<sup>64</sup> De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 279–83.

<sup>65</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, “The Hoplite Narrative,” in *Men of Bronze: Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece*, ed. Donald Kagan and Gregory F. Viggiano (Princeton University Press, 2013), 256–70.

cussed above, this represented a complete break with the former social relations that had upheld the warrior-aristocracy as a class and erosion of the basis for their own self-conception. It created a crisis in which the very definition of aristocracy was called into question at the same time as the aristocrats found themselves increasingly embattled with challenges to their position from below. In a certain sense, the erosion of the religious and military basis of their previous mode of exploitation left them with little justification for their rule and position in society aside from bare exploitation itself, which would've provided little ideological support in the face of challenges from the tyrants and demands for increasing rights and privileges from the rising middle strata and the lower classes that often formed the broader social base of their struggles. Add to this the fact that attempts to cling to the old ways were actively creating dysfunction and only increasing the strife, and it is clear that an ideological shift needed to take place, both in terms of legitimization and practical orientation, in order for the aristocracy to re-consolidate itself and its place in the fledgling relations of production that were arising around it.

It is in the context of this need that we should understand the development and spread of Pre-Socratic Monism and the concept of essence which emerged within it. But, before turning to PSM itself, it is useful to look at the writings of Theognis of Megara, in which we can see evidence of the shifting aristocratic response to this crisis and the changes it brought to the determination of truth even before development of PSM.

### 2.3. Theognis: A Transitional Conception of Truth

The poems attributed to Theognis are thought to have been written sometime between 650 and 550 BCE, thus firmly within the early period of the acute crisis of aristocracy that I have been discussing, but slightly before (or contemporaneous with) the first thinkers of PSM. In them, the poet bemoans the state of affairs in his polis, where, "this city is a city still, but lo! her people are other men, who of old knew neither judgments nor laws, but wore goatskins to pieces about their sides, and had their pasture like deer without this city; and now they be good men, O son of Polypaus, and they that were high be now of low estate."<sup>66</sup> These new men from the countryside, who the poet feels has usurped the place of his aristocratic peers, are distinguished throughout the poems by their attaining their position as a result of wealth (*ploutos*) rather

---

<sup>66</sup> Theognis, "The Elegiac Poems of Theognis," in *Elegy and Iambus*, vol. 1, Perseus Digital Library, 53–60.

than by being of good stock. The other oppositions that structure the poems are between truth—both as honesty and reality—and deception (or falsity), and between the good and the bad. These oppositions are structured in such a way that truth is aligned with good stock (heredity) and falsity/deception with wealth, while the good and the bad stand in an ambiguous and reversible position with respect to the others as a result of the falsity and deception generated by wealth. It is anxiety over the difficulty involved in distinguishing the *truly* good, which is aligned with heredity, but under the corrupting influence of wealth requires supplemental qualities to distinguish it—qualities like intelligence/-judgment (*gnōmē*), power (*dynamis*, which still has its bodily/martial strength connotations, but has taken on a sense of authority/influence that is probably more operative here), and moderation or self control—from the mere appearance of goodness created by wealth.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, despite the identification of wealth with corruption, this process of discernment is explicitly aligned with the discernment of legitimate currency from counterfeit, which is used as a model for the difference between outward appearance (*ideai*) and a true, inner content (such as a person's mind or heart).<sup>68</sup>

The first thing to note here is that unlike in the Homeric picture of the crisis that we discussed above, the commercial origins of the more acute crisis faced by Theognis can no longer be omitted or downplayed. At the same time, the effects of commercialization—represented here by wealth (the abstract expression of which is almost certainly a sign of its monetization)—can still be, and constantly are, denigrated and disavowed. This shows a certain continuity in the aristocratic response to commercialization and its effects—despite the shift in emphasis from omission and downplaying to denigration and disavowal, and despite the explicit foregrounding of (the bearers of) monetized wealth as the cause of the crisis.

The second is that heredity has become the defining feature of aristocracy rather than honor or martial prowess, despite the supplemental quality power (authority/influence) preserving some residue of the origins of the former in the latter. On the other hand, the other two supplemental qualities represent newer values that were absent in the Homeric portrayal of the warrior-aristocrat (although we might see a precursor to the foregrounding of judgment in the craftiness of Odysseus), ones determined by the crisis and changing material basis of aristocracy

<sup>67</sup> Moderation or self-control are most directly expressed in terms of taking the *messēn hodon*, the middle road or being *mesos*, in the middle.

<sup>68</sup> Theognis, "The Elegiac Poems of Theognis," 119–28.

itself. It is telling in this respect that one of the primary meanings of judgment within the poems seems to be the ability to correctly discern who and what is truly good in the face of the deceptive appearances generated by wealth, which is to say that judgment, as a definitional attribute of true aristocracy entails to a large extent the very ability to distinguish the aristocratic from the common. In this sense we could say that in *Theognis*, the aristocratic value system that upheld the legitimacy of the Homeric warrior-aristocrat has been evacuated of much of its concrete meaning and reduced to a bare status distinction the primary determination of which—heredity—is not substantial enough to clearly delineate it in the eyes of even its defenders.

The third thing of note is that the conception of truth put forward here represents a sort of intermediate conception between the mytho-religious and philosophical conceptions discussed above in relation to bardic truth. In *Theognis*, truth had not yet taken on its relationship to the metaphysical categories of unity, universality, and abstraction that it would in the concept of essence. Its sorting process still operated on the basis of moral criteria (albeit new moral criteria) and took people, words, and deeds as its characteristic objects. It was concerned with separating the good (aristocratic) person—or their actions, words or intentions—from the bad, though this had already become a process that functioned on the basis of a split between hierarchically ordered levels of reality, between sensible outward appearances and an imperceptible true content seen to underlies them.<sup>69</sup> It also still maintained a connection between truth and the social position of its bearer, although the privileged position had shifted from that of the bard to that of the aristocrat himself. On the whole, it is a conception of truth that appears relatively confused and empty of content. The possibility of accessing the truth underlying an appearance seems uncertain, as do the criteria on which the distinction between the true and the deceptive should be based. Even the criteria that are put forward are either themselves unstable and insufficient, like heredity, or relatively empty and circular, like judgment. In this sense, *Theognis'* conception of truth gives voice to a problem that it does not have the conceptual resources to address, or even formulate clearly.

At the end of Part 1, I argued that the transition from the bardic

---

<sup>69</sup> The modeling of this separation on the difference between either the exchange value of a commodity and its use-value, or between the material body of gold and silver and their value—which underlie the ability to counterfeit, or to find that the money you exchanged for was not actually equal to the value of the commodities exchanged for it—is already suggestive of the influence of money on this reconfiguration.

conception of truth to that of PSM was a result of the objectification of the function of reproducing the primary social presuppositions that underlie the existence of the social formation as a whole. Theognis lived in a social formation in which this objectification was relatively incomplete and it is on that basis that we can understand the incompleteness of his conception of truth. This incomplete objectification had proceeded to the point where the individual-subjective aspects of the social function of the bard had been supplanted, but the generalization of monetary mediation had not yet reached the point that it would after the introduction of coinage, and so the position of money as the primary presupposition of the social totality had not been fully solidified.<sup>70</sup>

It is also in this light that we should see the inaccessibility of truth in Theognis, as well as the relative diminishment of the importance of atemporality in his conception of it. It is because the social function of the bard had broken down and the reproduction of the social presuppositions had not yet found a stable bearer in money that the status of the truth, which had previously been grounded in that function, became uncertain<sup>71</sup>. Without such stable presuppositions, the sense of atemporality that derived from their role as *presuppositions* faded away, and although there was still a differentiation between sensible appearance and a supersensible content underlying it present, there was not a strong sense that this was accompanied by the corresponding temporal-atemporal distinction that was attached to it in both the preceding and succeeding conceptions. Even the sense that these are distinct planes of reality has now become confused; it is dirempted between the flattening entailed by it being a person's heart or mind that serves as the object of the truth-appearance distinction and the heightening of the distinction to the point of separation implied in the anxiety over whether truth can be apprehended at all.

Additionally, the opposition between the material body of money and its value had not been brought out into the full clarity that it would achieve after the introduction of coinage. In the distinction between legitimate and counterfeit coinage that undergirds Theognis' conception of truth, it is the material body of money (its weight, purity, etc.) that distinguishes the true from the false, whereas, with the introduction of

---

<sup>70</sup> For a similar, though ultimately divergent, account of this objectification and the role of coinage in it using different terminology, see Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 209.

<sup>71</sup> Clearly it is not just the reproduction of the social presuppositions of the social totality that had become uncertain in this period, but the reproduction of the social totality as a whole, as evidenced by the consistent civil strife discussed above.

coinage, the heightened visibility of the difference between a coin's value and the value of the metal it is coined from will reverse this relation—making it the abstract value rather than the material body of money that takes precedence—and thereby facilitate the transition to a conception of truth centered around the determinations of money as the embodiment of value, i.e. unity, universality and abstraction.

It is the combination of both of these factors—the incomplete objectification of the primary social presuppositions and the underdevelopment of the opposition between use-value and value—that explains the peculiarities of Theognis' conception of truth, especially the incompleteness and problematic character of it that led us to see it as intermediate or transitional. In the poems of Theognis a new conception of truth began to emerge from the husk of the old, just as in his social situation a new mode of production was being born from the crisis of the preceding forms. It is only with the consolidation of this new mode, whose fundamental moments were monetary mediation and the exploitation of slave labor, that the fledgling determination of truth glimpsed in his works was able to develop into the fully-fledged concept of essence that characterized the thought of the Pre-Socratic Monists.

As we shall see in Part 3, this did not happen of its own accord—a brute movement of the economic base that resounded through the superstructure and can be interpreted on the basis of homology. It was rather a reciprocal process in which certain conceptions were taken up and developed by certain (class-determined) subjects in response to the economic and social transformations facing them and on the basis of the functionality of those conceptions for those subjects within the class struggle that situated them, and, perhaps, on an inability on the part of those subjects to recognize the true content of the value form.

### 3. Pre-Socratic Monism

#### 3.1. Money & Pre-Socratic Monism

It is now time to turn to the emergence of the concept of essence itself and begin to build an account of its socio-historical determination. In this section, I will build off of Richard Seaford's account of the relationship between money and Pre-Socratic Monism in *Money and the Early Greek Mind* in order to establish a baseline conception of this relation. Then, in the next section, I will provide a critique of Seaford's account, showing how it runs into many of the same pitfalls that we saw earlier in Marcuse and Sohn-Rethel. This critique will provide a basis for devel-

oping my own positive conception of this relationship and its broader socio-historical determination in the third section. There, I will argue that it is only by understanding the determination of the concept of abstract substance developed in PSM in terms of its *function* as part of an aristocratic ideological project in response to the crisis outlined above that we can explain it adequately.

The great merit of Seaford's analysis of the relationship between money and Pre-Socratic thought, and what sets him apart from Marcuse and Sohn-Rethel, is the attention he pays to the concrete conditions in which this relationship developed. In part, this attention to the concrete is probably a product of general intellectual orientation and training as a classicist, but it is also a result of his delimitation of his object of investigation to what he identifies as the emergence of a specifically metaphysical content in the thought of the Pre-Socratics.<sup>72</sup> He describes this metaphysical content as "the counter-intuitive idea of a single substance underlying the plurality of things manifest to the senses," which allows the Pre-Socratics to develop an "idea of the universe as an *intelligible order* subject to the *uniformity of impersonal power*," and is distinguished as metaphysical by the "concern with reality as opposed to appearance, with what is fundamental as opposed to what is derivative, and with comprehensive as opposed to partial understanding."<sup>73</sup> Despite the inclusion in his description of broader cosmological considerations, concern with comprehensiveness, and the genesis of metaphysics as a discourse, all of which fall outside the scope of our own investigation (without therefore being dismissed as legitimate considerations), it is clear that the central determinations of this content are the same ones we have been describing as those of the concept of essence: unity, universality, abstraction and truth.

The most important consequence of the concreteness enabled by this delimitation is that Seaford, unlike Marcuse or Sohn-Rethel, is able to offer an explanation of why the emergence of the concept of essence occurred at the specific time and in the specific places that it did. His answer to these questions will ultimately turn out to be incomplete, but they provide us with many of the building blocks out of which my own explanation will be built. For Seaford, the most important of these changes is the introduction of coinage, which both leads to an intensification of the pace and extent of monetization and to a development of the opposition between use-value and value inherent in money.<sup>74</sup> He

<sup>72</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 175. See especially n. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 175.

<sup>74</sup> For the first, see especially, Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 126–9, 134–6,

does a thorough job of demonstrating that these are the primary terms in which the social formations in which PSM emerged and developed can be differentiated from the others in which it did not.<sup>75</sup> As a result of this, we have a plausible case for identifying the rapid monetization and development of the opposition between use-value and value that followed the introduction of coinage as decisive conditions of the emergence and development of PSM, even if we can't yet specify how this relationship was established.

Seaford also further specifies the significance of these two factors to the development of PSM and its central concept of abstract substance in ways that align with our exposition at the end of Part 2. He argues that rapid monetization results in what he calls the "social transcendence" of "monetary value" which he aligns with the "integrative power" of money, that explains the impersonal cosmology of the Pre-Socratics.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, it is the fetishism of the commodity, in which social relations become embodied in an external *thing*, a thing on which "individual autonomy and prosperity and collective cohesion and prosperity seem to depend," that Seaford sees as the ground of the "unconscious cosmological projection" of the money form into the thought determinations of PSM (on which more below).<sup>77</sup> All this points to the complete objectification of the function of reproducing the social presuppositions of the social formation as a whole that we highlighted as still missing in our analysis of the Theognis' transitional form of truth above. It is the generalization of monetary mediation as result of the introduction of coinage that allows this objectification to be completed. Once it is, we find that truth too has achieved a stable form in the concept of abstract substance, in which the hierarchical ordering of levels of reality has become attached to the determinations of unity, universality and abstraction, which are themselves determinations of the money form and the abstract value it embodies. It has also begun to regain the sense of distinction between the planes and association of the true with atemporality that it had in bardic conception, although these would only become fully realized with the completion of the progressive abstraction of PSM in the thought of Parmenides.<sup>78</sup> This does not take us beyond the homology we have established in the preceding sections, but it does confirm it and expand our understanding of the grounds of its development in PSM.

---

and 198–209; For the second, see Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 171.

<sup>75</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 175–89, 198–200, 209–10, and 244, n. 75.

<sup>76</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 209.

<sup>77</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 209.

<sup>78</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 206, 211, 231, 237 and 244–6

In a similar fashion, Seaford's account of the development of the opposition between concrete use-value and abstract value in coinage confirms and expands our understanding of its role in the development of PSM. He argues that coinage brings out this opposition, in two ways. The first is by diminishing the importance of the material qualities of the metal (its weight, purity, etc.) in favor of abstract quantity (the determinations of unit and amount) and the second is by establishing a "systematic discrepancy between the conventional value of a coin and the concrete value of its bullion."<sup>79</sup> Together, these increase the visibility of the opposition between use-value and value, and in doing so bring forward the mysterious ideality of value, the way it appears to be an abstract, supersensible element of every commodity, and one that is independent of their concrete material properties and origins.<sup>80</sup> It is this same ideality that characterizes the abstract substance of PSM, which, like value, is conceived of as an abstract universal that unifies the diverse multiplicity of concrete sensible particulars that it is separated off from. Similarly, the progressive abstraction that Seaford emphasizes in the development of PSM from Thales to Parmenides follows the contours of the opposition between abstract value and its concrete monetary embodiment, moving from conceptions that resemble money in being themselves concrete objects separated off from all others as the universal equivalent, the object-type in which their qualitative differences are extinguished and equalized, to those that resemble value in being a pure abstraction, divested of material qualities except insofar as it is embodied in the things that represent its form of appearance.

In addition to the introduction of coinage, Seaford's concreteness allows him to specify a number of other important socio-historical conditions of the emergence of the concept of abstract substance, although, without an explicit concept of the mode of production, he is left to present them (for the most part) as an external aggregate of independent conditions, which prevents him from giving an adequate account of the determinate relationships between them. The most important of these are the crisis of the traditional social order centered around the warrior-aristocracy, the class struggle that accompanied the rise of the Tyrants, and the aristocratic ideology of self sufficiency.<sup>81</sup> In terms of the

<sup>79</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 171.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 163–4.

<sup>81</sup> It should be noted here that all three of these suggest an implicit recognition of the importance of the mode of production and its class structure for explaining the emergence and development of PSM, registering some of the effects of the transition that we described above without being able to articulate them together as moments of a totality.

first two of these, aside from providing material that was used in constructing our account of the crisis described in Section 2.2 (and Appendix 2), the main thing that Seaford provides us with is confirmation that the social formations in which PSM developed were experiencing acute manifestations of that crisis.<sup>82</sup>

The third, on the other hand, introduces a new consideration, and one that will play an important part in my own conception of the social determination of PSM. Seaford introduces this ideological consideration in his discussion of Parmenides in order to explain the “problem of *why* value is abstracted from circulation.”<sup>83</sup> He thinks that this abstraction of value from circulation lies at the basis of the differences between Parmenides’ concept of substance, which resembles monetary value in its total abstraction, and the substance concepts of his predecessors, which combine elements of both value and circulation in their relative concretion.<sup>84</sup> The aristocratic ideology of self sufficiency, which finds its *locus classicus* in Aristotle’s formulation that, “it is the mark of an *eleutheros* (free man, gentleman) not to live for the benefit of another,” is introduced as an external ideological factor that acts on the homologous relationship between money and the philosophical content of PSM, unconsciously motivating the separation of abstract value from concrete circulation.<sup>85</sup> In doing so, it makes self-sufficiency, which Seaford thinks is already latent in the determination of value, into one of the central determinations that defines abstract substance.

This ideological determination of PSM brings us closer to our own concern with its ideological character, although it doesn’t go far enough in that direction insofar as it posits the ideological as an external influence that shapes the development of the concept of abstract substance—and does so at a relatively late stage in this development. This relative externality of ideological considerations to the determination of the substance concept of PSM raises the question of what, for Seaford, differentiates the ideological character of the concept of self-sufficiency from the supposedly non-ideological character of the money-derived content of the concept of substance. Seaford does not explicitly spell this out, but it

<sup>82</sup> Such as the fact that all of the *poleis* in which PSM emerged and developed were either experiencing, or had recently experienced, the rule of a tyrant and/or heightened class antagonism. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 183.

<sup>83</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 246.

<sup>84</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 246.

<sup>85</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 247; De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 90, 116–7; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2176 (1367a32), where the translation is “...not to live at another’s beck and call.”

is clear from the way he discusses self-sufficiency that it must be the derivation of the former concept from the class structure of the social formations in question—and from the position of the aristocracy within that structure—that marks it as ideological.

Following De Ste. Croix, Seaford describes the “ideology of economic self-sufficiency” as an expression of the “crucial opposition between those who by virtue of their command over the labor power of others were *free* to lead a civilized life (the ‘propertied class’) and those who had to work to maintain themselves.”<sup>86</sup> The class character of this ideology is introduced in this way only to be dropped and never mentioned again as the discussion turns back to the determination of self-sufficiency and its relation to the monetary determinations of substance.<sup>87</sup> This is what leads us to identify class origins as the distinguishing mark of ideological content for Seaford. It thereby also allows him to posit the other content of the concept of abstract substance in PSM as non-ideological insofar as it can be seen to *originate* from the determinations of the money form rather than from the class structure of the social formations in which that concept emerged and developed. This definition of ideology in terms of origins both obscures the ideological character of PSM as a whole and removes the questions of the mode of production and the reciprocal determination of its elements from consideration. As we shall see below, it is only by understanding PSM as determined from the beginning by its ideological function and class character that we can begin to offer an adequate explanation of its origins and development.

### 3.2. Critiquing Seaford’s Formalism

As I said at the beginning of the last section, Seaford’s account of the emergence and development of PSM gets us a long way towards our goal of explaining the socio-historical determination of the concept of essence. In this section, I will identify the aspects of Seaford’s analysis of the relationship between money and Pre-Socratic Monism that make it insufficient in relation to this goal. I will argue that this insufficiency is related to the formalistic framework of his project, which bears a number of similarities to the aspects of the works of Marcuse and Sohn-Rethel that I criticized at the beginning of this piece.

The formalism of Seaford’s approach can be detected in both its aims

---

<sup>86</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 247.

<sup>87</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 247. It is also, as far as I can tell, the only time in which he makes explicit reference to the mode of production in *Money and the Early Greek Mind*.

and its method. It aims at showing that money, or monetization, is a necessary historical condition of possibility of the “genesis and form” of the “metaphysical preconceptions about the basic constituent of the world and its transformations” shared by the various pre-socratic philosophers, or, in other words, of “the counter-intuitive idea of a single substance underlying the plurality of things manifest to the senses.”<sup>88</sup> Although this is not identical to the Kantian idealism that we saw in Sohn Rethel’s attempt to establish the necessary conditions of possibility of both “scientific cognition” and exchange itself in terms of the normative “postulates,” it still partakes of some of the same formalism, and even has something of the same form insofar as Seaford tends to frame his arguments about the monetary origin of said “preconceptions” in terms of their non-derivability from observation or deduction.<sup>89</sup> The aim of this project is formalist insofar as it aims at establishing the formal grounds of the possibility of PSM, rather than explaining the *actuality* of its socio-historical determination.<sup>90</sup> It is the latter that is our aim here, and this involves giving an account of why, and how, the form determinations of money were taken up into thought (in a disguised form) as the content determinations of abstract substance, rather than simply establishing the necessity (or at least plausibility) of the origination of the latter in the former.

Seaford’s argumentative method, while perhaps adequate to this aim, is constrained by the same formalism insofar as it centers around establishing that there is a (relatively complete) homology between the determinations of money and those of abstract substance, then eliminating other possible sources of the content of the latter (or assimilating them under the dominant influence of the monetary determinations on either historical or formal grounds (i.e. by showing the relative incompleteness of the homology between these and abstract substance), thereby establishing money as the source of those conceptual determinations.<sup>91</sup> In this methodology, the aim of establishing money or monetization as a historical condition of possibility of the concept of monistic substance and the reliance on homology reciprocally determine each other. One the one had, It is only because the historical conditions of PSM are

<sup>88</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 12 and 175.

<sup>89</sup> See, e.g. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 252.

<sup>90</sup> The focus on giving a historical explanation of the seeming *apriority* of its preconceptions adds to this formalism

<sup>91</sup> See, e.g. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 175–89, 205–9, 217–30 and 246–9. I am not primarily concerned here with the intrinsic weaknesses of this method, although I will note here that these center around the bad infinity of possible conditions and combinations of conditions that necessarily lie outside its eliminative procedure.

understood as conditions of possibility, and therefore formal conditions, that their “influence” on the latter is able to be analyzed primarily in terms of the formal relationship established by homology. On the other, it is only because that “influence” is understood in terms of homologous correspondence—which allows them to be understood as independent factors whose external conditioning of thought can be registered and isolated out in terms of the presence or absence of shared content—that Seaford is able to determine those historical conditions as *conditions of possibility* of the concept of abstract substance.<sup>92</sup> This reciprocally determining formalism also explains the externality and independence of the conditions in their relationship to each other and to PSM that we noted in the last section, as well as their determination as origins or sources of the content of PSM.

Seaford does attempt to offer an explanatory mechanism that could bridge the gap between socio-historical conditions of possibility and the actual relationship between thought and those conditions, but it is caught up in many of the same problems as his overall approach. His proposal for addressing both the why and the how of the homology between the money form and the substance concept of PSM is the “unconscious cosmological projection of abstract monetary substance.”<sup>93</sup> He portrays this unconscious cosmological projection of money (or of its universal power and exchangeability) as a particular instance of a more general phenomenon in which cosmic order is unconsciously imagined on the basis of the dominant human social institutions in a given society.<sup>94</sup> The determinate difference between PSM and other instances of this projection would then be the fact that the cosmic order takes

---

<sup>92</sup> Even the dismissal of certain other conditions on the basis of historical, rather than formal, criteria would not be enough to identify monetization as the decisive condition that differentiates between the circumstances in which PSM emerged and those in which it didn't without the supplementary evidence supplied by the relatively more complete homology of the content determinations of money with those of PSM compared to those other factors.

<sup>93</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 12.

<sup>94</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 11 and 224–5. The inadequacy of unconscious cosmological projection as an explanation of the relationship between monetization and PSM can already be seen here in the slippage between monetary substance, which presumably refers to value as an *abstract object* distinguishable from its *concrete monetary form of appearance*, and the universal power and exchangeability of money, which refer to *social functions* of money arising from the concrete instantiation of value in the process and relations of exchange. Universal power in particular should not be seen as a property of money itself, but as a description of one of the social functions that it has for its possessors. This confusion about what exactly is being projected produces a certain looseness that facilitates the overall argument but simultaneously reduces its clarity and raises questions about its validity.

on the abstract and impersonal determinations of money rather than, for example, the personal characteristics of the monarchical household or the redistributive form of the sacrificial feast.<sup>95</sup> In this conception, PSM, “like all representations of the cosmos... attempts to discover order and uniformity underlying apparent chaos.”<sup>96</sup> Seaford thus suggests a transhistorical psychological mechanism that responds to a transhistorical psychological need for order and uniformity, in which objects are projected or “imagined” as a model for cosmological representation because they stand out as embodiments of order in their societies, and so can be “abstracted from the potential chaos of experience.”<sup>97</sup>

The largest problem with this explanation is that the concept of projection itself is vague and Seaford does nothing to clarify the sense in which he is using it. As Laplanche and Pontalis had already pointed out in 1967, projection has been used in a number of different, often ill defined, senses, most of which can be reduced down to a general notion of displacement or externalization of an element (typically a psychological or neurological element).<sup>98</sup> In contrast to this is the psychoanalytic conception, in which this externalization is predicated on a rejection of or refusal to recognize the projected element (as belonging to the subject).<sup>99</sup> Seaford gives no indication of using projection in the more specified psychoanalytic sense, despite this leaving no explanation for *why* this projection happens aside from a similarly vague (and, in my opinion, highly suspect) assertion of a transhistorical relation between cosmological representations and “attempts to discover order and uniformity underlying apparent chaos.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, the element supposed to be projected, “human institutions” which are the “elements of the familiar” that “especially embody the order and uniformity that is abstracted from the potential chaos of experience,” is similarly indeterminate (and therefore both highly contestable and at the same time imbued with an immediate sense of plausibility).<sup>101</sup> Not only that, but the unconscious nature of the proposed projection relies on a similarly underdetermined notion of the unconscious that leaves out the psychoanalytic emphasis on repression as a constitutive factor in unconscious operations, which

<sup>95</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 11 and 224–5.

<sup>96</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 224.

<sup>97</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 224.

<sup>98</sup> Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Routledge, 2018), 349.

<sup>99</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, 349.

<sup>100</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 224. Note the similarity to Marcuse’s ‘quest for unity and universality’.

<sup>101</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 224.

leaves us with little idea as to what causes the unconscious repression and projection of social institutions, as opposed to a conscious transformation of the material in thought. Ultimately, the only answers Seaford provides as to why we should take unconscious cosmological projection to be the mechanism through which money determines the ideas introduced by PSM are non-answers insofar as they do little more than re-assert the existence of the formal correspondence established by his general approach—a correspondence they were meant to explain.

Another reason for the inadequacy of Seaford's account for our purposes is that he doesn't give enough consideration to the *function* of PSM, or its central metaphysical concepts, within the broader social situation that they arise in, or within the determinate class relations that condition the individuals who developed it. This further consigns his explanation to its repetitive dependence on the homology between the money form and the concept of abstract substance and prevents him from escaping the charges of developing a reflection theory of socio-economic determination, despite his attempts to avoid the latter by acknowledging and integrating into his conception other sources of determination like political developments, mythological predecessors, ideological influences, and ego formation.<sup>102</sup> To clarify, it is not that these factors do not play a part in the development of PSM but rather that acknowledging them without integrating them into a broader functional conception fails to recognize the main problem with reflection theories, which lies in their formalism rather than their limited breadth, and, in doing so, reproduces that problem. It is to elaborating such a functional conception and showing how it allows us to bring together the disparate elements of our exposition up to this point that we shall turn in the next section.

### 3.3. The Emergence of Essence

In order to avoid the problems that we attributed above to the formalism of Seaford's approach, we must return to the crisis of aristocracy, and the series of developing social crises it kicked off and remained entangled with, and understand PSM in terms of how it functioned as a response to those crises and their development. In particular, we should understand it as a response to acute moments of crisis by members of the aristocracy that had specific functions in relation to their class position. The acute crisis brought on by rapid monetization after the introduction of coinage would have brought into sharper focus the disjunction between the ideological and libidinal constitution of the aristocratic subject, whose

---

<sup>102</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 12 and 217–30.

lingering attachment to certain ideas, values, and forms of activity still corresponded to a significant extent to a position within older relations of production that no longer characterized the reality they found themselves in and had to navigate in order to reproduce themselves both as individuals and as a class.<sup>103</sup>

In this light, the conceptual innovations of PSM should be seen as a part of the broader aristocratic response to the acute developments of this crisis brought on by the rapid monetization of the social formations in which they arose. In general, it functioned to refashion the ideological foundations of the rule, self-conception and general worldview of the aristocracy in response to the threats posed to them by crisis—and the role the previous aristocratic ideological forms continued to play in the development and perpetuation of said crisis. Earlier, we saw how neither the nostalgic omission characteristic of Homer's early response to the crisis brought on by commercialization, nor the anxious denigration of Theognis' response, was able to adequately orient them to these changing conditions. At the same time, we saw how the parallel development of commercialization and the crisis allowed this need for ideological reconfiguration to come out more clearly in the poems of Theognis—where the emptying out of the previous value system had already prompted the beginnings of a reorientation towards new ones—and how this was accompanied by a reconceptualization of truth that mirrored the (still incomplete) objectification of the social function of reproducing the presuppositions of the social formation as a whole. We should understand the development of Pre-Socratic Monism as a new stage in this development of the aristocratic response to crisis in which the rapid and pervasive monetization brought on by the introduction of coinage (along with the other features of coins mentioned above) allowed the early philosophers to develop an ideological account that was able to more adequately respond to the crises they faced.

This functional conception aids our attempt to explain the socio-historical determination of the concept of essence in a number of ways. The first is by allowing us to develop a better account of the reasons for the isomorphism between the determinations of its concept of substance and the form-determinations of money. In order to more effectively respond to the social developments facing them, aristocrats in rapidly monetizing *poleis*, both individually and as a class, needed to develop a more adequate understanding of their societies. The crisis had created

---

<sup>103</sup> This is especially true if we take into account Sartre's points about the importance of childhood and the class situation of the previous generations in ideological formation. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Knopf, 1963), 57–65.

an unusual situation in which the reproduction of the exploiting class as a class required not so much a (more or less direct) reproduction of the ruling ideology, and its forms practice and “know-how”, as a *fundamental transformation of the ruling ideology* on the basis of which the exploiting class could refashion its misaligned and counter-productive forms of practice and “know-how.”<sup>104</sup> So, when I say they needed to develop a more adequate understanding, I do not mean this simply in the sense of abstract or instrumental knowledge, but rather in the sense of a conceptual anchoring point, a reality schema, on the basis of which they could ensure the effectiveness of this reorientation. Their societies were increasingly constituted as interdependent totalities given unity by money as the singular concrete embodiment of the abstract value of commodities, for which they were universally exchangeable and in which they expressed their equivalence and interchangeability with each other. In positing the universe in a similar fashion, as an ordered impersonal totality in which multiplicity is given unity by a single universal substance, PSM provided a conceptual schema that corresponded to the new reality adequately enough to serve as a foundation for this necessary ideological realignment.<sup>105</sup> In this context, we can understand the isomorphism between its determinations and those of the money form as a consequence of the ideological demands made upon the aristocracy by the crisis.<sup>106</sup>

Our functional conception also allows us to return to the question we raised in Section 2.1 about the continuities between the Bardic conception of truth and the determination of truth in PSM, in which key elements of the earlier conception persisted despite the objectification of the social function of the bard, which eliminated the direct connection between speech and the reproduction of the social presuppositions of the social totality—a connection on which the truth of that speech had rested. As I noted above, Theognis’ transitional conception of Truth did not just correspond to the (incomplete) objectification of the formerly subjective presuppositions, but also to the attempt to reconfigure aristocratic values and redefine aristocracy on the basis of those values, however

---

<sup>104</sup> This conception of the ruling ideology and its relation to practice and “know-how” draws from Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Verso, 2014), 235–6.

<sup>105</sup> This does not mean that it was the only schema developed to fulfill such a function, or that it did so perfectly, although the lasting influence of its conceptual innovations attest to its success—at least among certain fractions of the aristocracy.

<sup>106</sup> It is important to note that it was not just the internal crisis of aristocracy that necessitated this ideological realignment but also the heightened conditions of class struggle and external social crisis that demanded their reconfiguration as a class.

limited that attempt may have been. This ideological project provides a functional reason for the retention of the concept of truth among both Theognis and the pre-socratics, despite the collapse of the social relationships in which the traditional conception had been embedded.<sup>107</sup> The goal of that project was to reestablish, to the extent that they could, the position they had previously enjoyed before the crisis, and in particular before the usurpation of the tyrants, as well as the general challenging of their status from below by the broader lower classes connected to this usurpation. In response to these challenges, they looked back to the previous fount of aristocratic legitimacy and attempted to adapt it to the conditions they found themselves in.<sup>108</sup> The tension between this restorative tendency and the adaptive one discussed in the preceding paragraph goes a long way towards explaining the reasons why the traditional conception of truth was both partially retained and at the same time maintained its correspondence with the now objectified social presupposition of the social formation.

There was a double reciprocity between the subjective project of the aristocratic proponents of PSM and the objective conditions in which that project was formulated. On the first level, the objective conditions determined the needs that the project constituted a response to and the class situation in which those needs and that response were situated, while the subjective project determined the specific way in which those needs would be taken up—i.e. in terms of the inherited traditions of the aristocratic subjects who formulated and developed that project and the promise of restoration that they held out. On the second level, the objective conditions also made it so that the subjective project could not be formulated along the same lines as it had been before. The objectification of the reproduction of the social presuppositions of the social formation as a whole, and the need for a reality schema on which to base the project of ideological realignment, meant that the traditional concept of truth had to be reformulated, while, from the subjective side, the contours of that traditional conception seem to have determined that reformulation as a reformulation that retained its connection to the

---

<sup>107</sup> For the conception of a project used here, see Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 93–100; and Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1974), 214–21.

<sup>108</sup> This is supported by the explicit incorporation of more anachronistic mythico-religious elements connected to the traditional conception of truth in the presentation of the various pre-socratics, such as the residual mythological elements and aspects of the mystery cults that informed both the form and content of PSM, especially in the works of Heraclitus and Parmenides. See Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 217–30 and 231–42; and Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 130–4.

(now objective) social presuppositions.

To fully understand this last point, we must examine the subjective reasons for retaining a conception of truth a little more closely. What was the appeal of a conception of truth for the aristocratic proponents of PSM? While we cannot say for certain, the most likely reason for this appeal, and the one that best explains the continued centrality of the social presuppositions to this conception, is that it has something to do with the *transcendence* enabled by the supersensible and atemporal aspects of truth, which was based on the *social* transcendence of the presuppositions of the social formation.<sup>109</sup> This transcendence allowed the aristocratic proponents of PSM to eternalize their position in the relations of exploitation, which was beneficial as a means of both legitimating the aristocracy as a whole, and of strengthening the claims of their ideological project in relation to other aristocratic ideologies that did not invoke the same transcendence (and which likely represented newer, more commercialized class fractions).<sup>110</sup>

We can see here how the function of legitimating the rule of the aristocracy, which, in Section 2.1, we separated out in discussing the social function of the bard in as the less important side in terms of understanding the determination of truth, actually played a role in the persistence of that determination after the concrete relations in which it was embedded dissolved, and of its connection to the social transcendence of the social presuppositions. Without the direct connection that existed between bardic speech and the reproduction of those presuppositions, it was this function of legitimization and its connection to that transcendence that maintained the overall connection between truth and the now-objectified presuppositions. At the same time both the dissolution of that direct

---

<sup>109</sup> As we saw in Section 3.1, Seaford attributes this social transcendence to the “integrative power” of money, and the way in which it becomes a necessary form of mediation on which the individual and community both depend. This is not necessarily wrong, as both of these are aspects of its role as a presupposition of the social formation as a whole, but it does not fully grasp why that role makes it socially transcendent. As I argued in Section 2.1, it was the place of the cultural presuppositions reproduced by the bard outside of the sensuous activity of the community as conditions of communal production that were not themselves produced by the community that constituted their social transcendence. With money, the situation is similar, although it is produced by the community. The reason why it still functions as a presupposition despite being produced as a part of the communal labor is because of the way that the process of commercialization individualizes social production and posits money as the sole representative of the *sociality* of labor. In this way, money can be seen as socially transcendent insofar as it stands outside the individual processes of production that constitute the total social labor and, though itself produced, is separated off from the rest of social production as the ground of its determination as *social* production.

<sup>110</sup> On this last point, see Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 107–10.

connection and the objectification of those presuppositions meant that truth had to be configured differently to maintain its general ideological functionality.<sup>111</sup>

The third way in which our functional conception of PSM helps us is by allowing us to specify the relationship between the monetary content of PSM and the aristocratic ideology of self-sufficiency that we discussed in Section 3.1. This ideology of self-sufficiency, already recognizable in Homer, increasingly revealed itself to be the bedrock on which the distinction between aristocrat and non-aristocrat could be made as the monetary confusions of the crisis were worked out and weaker elements of the traditional concept of aristocracy, like heredity, fell to the wayside as the class was reconstituted along the lines set out by the transforming mode of exploitation and commercialization.<sup>112</sup> In this sense, it both pre-existed the developments of PSM and had a certain centrality to the ideological project of the aristocracy as a whole that exceeded the bounds of the specific project that animated PSM. So, to a certain extent, Seaford was right to pose it as external to PSM, but, by understanding it as a supplementary influence that modified and introduced extraneous content to the money-derived content of PSM, he did not understand the way in which the two were co-constitutive in the formulation of PSM and reciprocally determined one another.

Both the reconfiguration of truth according to the determinations of the money form and the definition of aristocracy in terms of self sufficiency should be seen as part of the same project of ideological realignment that represented the subjective moment of the determination of PSM. The ideology of self-sufficiency centered around an abstract negation of dependence that allowed the aristocrat to be distinguished from both the commoner and the slave (and from women, who, even if part of an aristocratic household, were considered dependent on the male householder), and made the definition of aristocracy the same as that of freedom, which as a moral ideal provided both a justification for aristocratic rule and a normative standard on which individual conduct could be guided and evaluated, and thereby brought into line with the continuing reproduction of the mode of exploitation.<sup>113</sup> The impor-

<sup>111</sup> For example, the truth of a statement could no longer be seen as attached to the social position of the speaker, but instead had to be understood as independent and objective, and so (in principle) universally accessible, but, at the same time, increasingly contestable and relative insofar as its independence and objectivity separated it from its connection to any specific individual.

<sup>112</sup> De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 114–7; Moses Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York Review Books, 2002), 68–70.

<sup>113</sup> This alignment of aristocracy and freedom also played a significant role in

tance of this emphasis on self-sufficiency can be seen not just in the later developments of a figure like Parmenides, as Seaford emphasizes, but already in one of the earliest formulations of the doctrine of PSM, that of Anaximander, whose *apeiron*, aside from taking on the determinations of money (especially in its function as means of circulation), is said to have no beginning, and to surround and steer all things.<sup>114</sup> This connection of abstract substance with stasis and independence clearly has something to do with the transcendence of truth that we discussed above, but its specific form, especially the way in which the *apeiron* "steers all things" from its position of static independence, bears a significant resemblance to the ideology of self-sufficiency and the aristocratic class position on which it was based.

If we take a closer look at that class position in relation to the monetized economy of the *polis*, and the way in which aristocratic ideology represents a one-sided abstraction that covers over the contradictions inherent in that relation, this resemblance becomes even more telling. As the primary owners of the land and slaves through which the surplus product, on which the whole monetary economy of the polis was based, was appropriated, the aristocracy did indeed have a certain foundational independence in relation to that economy. At the same time, this appearance of independence, which expressed itself in the one-sided abstraction of the ideology of self-sufficiency, was matched by a reciprocal dependence on the slaves whose surplus labor supported their consumption, on the commodified division of labor that was inseparable from said surplus appropriation, and on the goods (and services) they received in exchange for the products of the surplus labor they appropriated, without which they could not have lived as they did.<sup>115</sup>

---

bringing the conduct of the democratic *polis* as a whole into line with the reproduction of the relations of exploitation in so far as political freedom took on the same determinations and thereby shaped the norms and expectations of inter-*polis* relations and conduct for the citizen body in general.

<sup>114</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 192. Seaford does suggest the possibility of earlier influences of the ideology of self-sufficiency, but only traces it back to Xenophanes, merely raises the possibility without following through on it, and does not see how much of a constitutive role it plays in the overall substance conception of PSM. See Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 212 and 248.

<sup>115</sup> This one sided appearance of independence was strengthened by the fact that, as owners of agricultural land and slaves to work it, most aristocrats could hypothetically have supported themselves and their households without engaging in exchange, although probably only temporarily and, again, not in the concrete ways in which they actually lived. Furthermore, the goods that supported both the immediate consumption of the aristocracy and the exchange they engaged in had become their property neither as a result of their own labor nor through exchange, so that when they were exchanged (or consumed),

From the perspective of this one-sided self-sufficiency, the aristocracy could appear as a static, unproduced foundation of the social formation as a whole, one which steered the whole world of exchange-mediated activity and covered over the aristocracy's own dependence on both that world of exchange and the slaves whose labor provided the foundation of their existence and social position. It was this one-sided abstraction of the aristocratic position in terms of independence that was transferred to the abstract substance of PSM and increasingly made self-sufficiency into one of its core determinations.

This combination of determinations derived from the money form and the ideology of self-sufficiency (or the contradictory objective situation that it covered over) were complementary and helped to stabilize each other. The determination of truth as essence allowed the proponents of PSM to compensate for the one-sidedness of aristocratic self-sufficiency by aligning independence with true reality and consigning the side of aristocratic dependence to the inessential (and, following the absolute distinction posited by Parmenides, *untrue*) world of becoming. It also supplemented the ideological function of distinguishing between aristocrats and non-aristocrats on the basis of self-sufficiency with a positive account of their right to rule on the basis of intellectual superiority or access to truth. The determination of self sufficiency, on the other hand, allowed them to cohere and stabilize the concept of abstract substance itself in its reflection of the contradiction between the abstract value and concrete embodiment of money.<sup>116</sup> It also counteracted (to some extent) the depriving of truth that had resulted from the objectification of the social function of the bard by re-establishing a connection between truth and the position of the aristocrat.<sup>117</sup> Together, these factors allowed the aristocratic proponents of PSM to depict themselves as the expositors of an esoteric (even if *in principle* universal) doctrine that granted access to

they appeared to a certain extent as not just a foundation, but an unproduced foundation, separated both spatially and socially from the process of becoming that gave rise to it. From the perspective we developed above in relation to the social presuppositions of the social formation, it could be said that the ideology of self-sufficiency had its roots in aristocratic control of the other major presuppositions of the social formation, land and slaves, from which it obtained its own transcendence..

<sup>116</sup> This is evidenced by the progressive abstraction of the substance concepts of the pre-socratics (which will be discussed more below), which was accompanied by an increasing prominence of the determination of self-sufficiency. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 244.

<sup>117</sup> This was also aided by the class position of the aristocracy itself, which both ensured that they were the main people who had the free time necessary for metaphysical inquiry and, by separating them from the immediate process of production, promoted their development of an abstract consciousness suited to those pursuits.

true reality in opposition to the mere appearance of everyday life, but only for the few whose social position identified them with that truth and enabled them to reach the heights of abstract intellect needed to understand that doctrine.

Our functional conception of PSM has already allowed us to develop a much more concrete conception of the emergence of the concept of essence in PSM, but there is one crucial question left to be answered in order to fill out this picture. This is the question of why the determinations of money took the form of cosmological or metaphysical determinations about the universe, or why they were displaced from their social context into the cosmological/metaphysical register. The first likely reason for this is that despite the innovativeness of their new conception, the early philosophers still did not produce it from thin air. The thinkers in the tradition of PSM needed to draw on the ideological resources present to them in order to refashion them, and these were largely cosmological and mytho-poetic.<sup>118</sup> As the tradition developed, we can see a progressive detachment from these origins, what some have referred to as a secularization, but never a full break.<sup>119</sup> The second reason is that despite needing to develop a conception that allowed them to orient themselves within the newly and increasingly monetized social world they lived in, explaining that world, or the mechanisms of its monetary mediation, was not the primary (implicit or explicit) aim of their accounts. These accounts responded to the conflict and confusion caused by the misalignment between aristocratic ideology and its social conditions, and its primary function should be seen in terms of refashioning that ideology rather than directly explaining those conditions. In fact, the latter aim probably wouldn't have been a legible project given the ideological foundations that served as their starting point—although it would become one for a figure like Aristotle, but only after the ideological and philosophical changes that PSM inaugurated had developed and entrenched themselves. The third, and most significant, reason brings us back to the critique of Seaford's unconscious cosmological projection that I made above. I mentioned there that Seaford's use of the psychological concepts of projection and the unconscious ignored the psychoanalytic specification of these mechanisms in terms of a negative reaction to some content that is unable to be recognized. From this perspective, we can see the displacement of the determinations of money from their social context into the realm of pure thought as a response to

---

<sup>118</sup> See Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 217–30.

<sup>119</sup> Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 89–106 and 130.

some aspect(s) of the social content of the former that they were unable (or unwilling) to recognize, or, to put it in more Jamesonian language, we can see it as an imaginary solution to the real contradiction between money or monetization and their own class position and ideological project.<sup>120</sup>

The primary contradiction that motivated this displacement was between the equality of abstract human labor, which is posited by the money form, and the relations of exploitation that determined the class position of the aristocracy, which posited an inequality between the labor of slaves and that of free men. Marx himself notes this as an explanation for Aristotle's inability to develop a concept of value in the first chapter of *Capital*. He says that "Aristotle himself was unable to extract this fact, that, in the form of commodity values, all labor is expressed as equal human labor and therefore as labor of equal quality, by inspection from the form of value, because Greek society was founded on the labor of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labor-powers."<sup>121</sup> If we take the class-situated demand for ideological realignment made by the crisis and the objectification of the social function of the bard as the positive grounds of the functionally-determined taking up of the money form by PSM, then we can take this contradiction between the equality posited by money and the inequality posited by slavery (which has its roots in the same conditions that produced the crisis and its demands) as the negative ground that determined that taking up as a displacement into the cosmological/metaphysical register. We can also see how the ideological project itself further determined the inability to take up this contradiction, which would have stood in opposition to its aim of legitimizing the position of the aristocracy in the relations of exploitation.

There is another way in which this equality posited by the money-form may have served as a negative ground of the development of PSM. In order to posit the equality of different concrete labors, money must simultaneously posit them as homogenous fractions of the total social labor. In exchanging their products for money, the owners of those products posit the labor that went into them as as equal not to a specific other kind of labor, but rather to all other kinds of labor that have their

<sup>120</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 79.

<sup>121</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 151–2. Although it is clear that Aristotle was able to turn the concept of essence back on the original context from which its primary determinations originated, it is also clear that this is a secondary application of the primarily metaphysical concept, and therefore still dependent on the distancing effected by the original displacement, and also that he was still unable to directly apply it to the analysis of value or money itself, whose essence he cannot identify, leading him to declare it inessential and untrue.

equivalent in money, and this is what allows the value of the different products of those labors to appear “as values of quantitatively comparable magnitude.”<sup>122</sup> In doing so, those owners posit their labor in relation to the sum total of the labor in their society, but in an externalized form, as a relation between objects, rather than as a relation between people.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, the process of commercialization that gives rise to money increases the division of labor and in doing so it also increases the degree of interdependence between the producers, integrating previously independent branches of production, and communities, into the unified division of labor of a broader social formation.<sup>124</sup> This means that money, along with the commercialization process that it represents the formal culmination of, makes a number of independent communities into an interdependent social totality in a new and more comprehensive way, turns the implicit and subjective unity of those communities (in which which the primary processes of production had, for the most part, been conducted on the basis of the independent household with the function of reproducing that household) into an explicit and objective one, and, at the same time, obscures the social character and interdependence of the various labor processes which it brings into relation and thereby constitutes as fractions of the total social labor, and does so exactly insofar as it enacts that objectification.<sup>125</sup> As we saw above,

---

<sup>122</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 159.

<sup>123</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 164.

<sup>124</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 471-2.

<sup>125</sup> Contra Marx, I think that the way in which the commodity and money forms constitute labor as a fraction of a social whole should also be understood as the basis of the qualitative equality of the different labors objectified in the process of exchange. Marx’s proposal, that it is their physiological equality insofar as they are expenditures of human muscles, nerves, etc. that forms the basis of their commensurability as quantities of abstract labor, relies on something external to the commodity form to explain the equalization posited by it. While this remains a possibility, it seems more likely to me that the equalization posited by the commodity form has its basis in an aspect of that form itself rather than in an external abstraction, the concrete derivation of which from the act of exchange seems unclear. Exchange itself, and especially monetary exchange, posits the different labors as social at the same time as it posits them as equal, so it seems reasonable to look for the basis of their equality in the sociality posited along with it. In fact, as we saw above, the quantitative comparability of commodities (in which their equality is expressed) is itself based on their exchangeability not with each other directly, but with the embodiment of abstract social labor. This allows us to identify the equality between the labor embodied in exchanged commodities and the quantitative determination of their value as labor *time* as both having their origin in the way in which exchange posits the different labors as a fraction of the total social labor, with the former deriving from the socialization it effects and the latter from the externalization. It also suggests a possible basis in the commodity form itself for the persistent reappearance of assertions of the inequality of human beings under capitalism, in the form of theoretical and practical

the ideology of self-sufficiency was based in the one-sided abstraction away from the interdependent side of this contradiction, and so recognizing this sociality would have further prevented PSM from fulfilling its function insofar as it undermined the functionality of that ideology.

This explanation of the displacement also allows us to understand the process of progressive abstraction that we discussed above, in which the attempt to identify the nature of the underlying substance moved from candidates that resembled the concrete use-value of money to candidates that resembled its abstract value.<sup>126</sup> Now, we can see how the contours of that development, as well as the confusion that prompted it, were results of this negative ground of the displacement of the money form. It was the way in which this displacement and its grounds (along with the inherent fetishism of the money form) obscured the *actual substance* of value—abstract labor—that determined the form of PSM as a identificatory search and determined the poles within which the development took place. It was because this actual substance was inaccessible that the concept of substance arose in the form of a question as to the identity of that substance, and that the contours of the development took place between the contradictory poles of that substance's form of appearance, the relation between which cannot be reconciled without a notion of that substance itself.

This absence created an instability in the conceptual content of the early formulations of PSM in which it oscillated between the poles of the contradiction, and it was the determination of self sufficiency that helped stabilize this oscillation by driving the process of progressive abstraction noted by Seaford. As PSM developed, there was a simul-

---

racism, despite the tendency to acknowledge the realization of formal equality on the basis of the wage relation. On this account of the origins of equalization, that persistent tendency to racialization could be understood as having its basis in the commodity form insofar as 1) the necessarily nation-state-based organization of capitalist social formations whose economic self-identity is expressed in the differential exchange rates between different national currencies keeps the world broken up into a multiplicity of separate social totalities, which provides a material basis for denying the extension of the principle of formal equality beyond the bounds of the national community (and the derivative ideological expansion of this denial to include members of the racist's nation who can be imaginatively identified as foreign), and 2) the continuing inability to recognize the social content of the commodity form due to the externalized form of social totality posited by the commodity, and the fetishism resulting from it, also undermines the recognition of equality by obscuring its origins and contributing to its ideological slipperiness insofar as it provides a basis for its continuing determination as abstract, merely formal equality. On the national organization of capitalist social formations and the exchange rates between national currencies, see John Milios and Dimitris P. Sotiropoulos, *Rethinking Imperialism: A Study of Capitalist Rule* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 105–8 and 154–9.

<sup>126</sup> See Section 3.1.

taneous increase in the prominence of self sufficiency in the substance concepts of its proponents and in the abstraction of that concept as it moved from a greater resemblance to concrete money toward one to abstract value, until, with Parmenides concept of abstract Being, the determinations of truth became completely identified with determinations of self-subsistent abstract value.<sup>127</sup> This is not necessarily to say that Parmenides' conception more adequately reflects the substance of value, which, though abstract, is the result of a process of mediation that it cannot be separated from (which probably makes it more akin to Heraclitus' conception and its "reversible exchange"), but rather that in it the one-sided abstraction of value and the one-sided abstraction of self-sufficiency developed into a relatively stable form in which each covered over the defects of the other—thus bringing to a close the first phase of the development of the concept of essence in Ancient Greece in which the question of substance, of identifying the *arche*, was primary.<sup>128</sup>

Now that our account of the emergence and development of the con-

---

127 Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 244.

128 For a discussion of "reversible exchange" in Heraclitus, see Chris Kassam and Duschinsky, "Heraclitus, Seaford and Reversible Exchange," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (2017): 609–33, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.31.4.0609>. I think that Kassam overemphasizes the extent to which the reversibility of exchange in Heraclitus negates the increased level of abstraction that Seaford identifies there. It seems clear to me that Heraclitus posits substance as the inseparable unity of both the abstract self-subsistence of the one and the concrete becoming of the many, while at the same time privileging the one as the underlying moment and ground of the truth of the movement. My favorite example of this is D50 (B54), which Laks and Most translate as "Invisible fitting-together (*harmoniē*), stronger than a visible one." Besides already asserting the precedence of invisible harmony, and so the abstract moment, in terms of its content, this fragment also enacts it formally. The greek text is structured as two pairs of oppositions, an inner opposition between *aphanēs* (invisible) and *phanerēs* (visible), which itself has a visible harmony in terms of its morphology, and an outer opposition between *harmoniē* (fitting-together/harmony) and *kreittón* (stronger), the latter of which originally meant superiority granted to the warrior-aristocrat by the gods and was connected to the idea of domination and came to have a distinct physical/martial sense compared to the other comparative forms that were used to mean 'better.' This seems to be an unreconciled contradiction both visibly and in terms of meaning, but, in the context of the sentence, there is an invisible harmony insofar as the outer terms both determine the relationship between the terms of the inner opposition, with the first providing a substrate of sorts for the meaning of visible and invisible (as both referring to harmonies) and the second providing the structure of their relation. Thus, the outer terms not only create an invisible harmony between the inner terms but also reconcile their own opposition through that act of providing invisible harmony to the inner opposition. It is this invisible harmony that establishes the harmony of the fragment as a whole, that reconciles the opposition between form and content and into which it had divided itself. Xenophanes and Heraclitus, *Fragments*, in *Early Greek Philosophy: Early Ionian Thinkers, Part 2*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. André Laks and Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 2016), 162–63.

cept of essence in this first phase is drawing to a close, I will summarize the conclusions that can be drawn from what has been said in this section. The emergence of the concept of abstract substance should be understood as a functional response to the crisis caused by the reciprocal development of commercialization and the centralization of slavery in the relations of production. This crisis, and the misalignment it caused between the ideological constitution of the aristocracy and objective conditions they found themselves in, created a demand for fundamental ideological realignment that the Pre-Socratic Monists attempted to meet. To do so, they took up and adapted the traditional conception of truth as a means of both reasserting the legitimacy which it had conferred upon their predecessors and providing a reality schema on the basis of which the required reorientation could be grounded. This meant reconfiguring that conception on the basis of the determinations of money, which had taken the place of the customary and cultural traditions reproduced by the bard as the social presupposition of the social totality. At the same time, the contradiction between the substance of value and the position of the aristocracy required the determinations of money to be taken up in a disguised form in order to retain their functional value, displacing them into the cosmological/metaphysical register. But, this reconfiguration of truth on the basis of the displaced form determinations of money could not fulfill the ideological function demanded of it by the crisis on its own. It both required supplementation from, and helped cover over the one-sidedness of, the pre-existing and developing aristocratic ideology of self sufficiency, which provided a basic definition of the aristocrat on the basis of their place in the relations of exploitation, helped stabilize the conceptual confusion caused by the displacement of money, and determined the development of the concept of substance towards increasing abstraction and correspondence with abstract value rather than its concrete embodiment in money.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Methodological Conclusions

At the beginning of this piece, I said that in it I would focus on laying the groundwork for a larger project with two aims: providing a historical materialist account of the origins and development of the concept of essence and developing a Marxist theory of essence that facilitates the project of revolutionary praxis in the present. It is now time to evaluate our progress on these fronts, although, due to the preliminary nature

of our investigation, what we will be able to say about the latter will necessarily be more abstract and provisional than what we can say about the former.

The contribution made by this piece with respect to the first aim can be broken up into two categories. The first is the confirmation and development of certain theoretical and methodological principles and the second is the provision of a baseline understanding of the emergence of the concept of essence itself in the Greek context. In terms of methodology, the main principles whose fruitfulness I believe has been shown in the course of our investigation, and which I would like to highlight here are:

1. Any explanation of the socio-historical determination of the concept of essence must be grounded in a reconstruction of the concrete historical material corresponding to particular social formations rather than transhistorical determinations or teleological schemas that determine that material retrospectively.
2. Such a reconstruction must itself have its basis in the mode of production and its transformations considered as a total social process in which relatively independent spheres and elements reciprocally condition one another in an asymmetrical fashion that gives priority to the broadly economic base.<sup>129</sup>
3. Attention must be paid to uneven character of such a process, and especially to the lag between the ideological and subjective elements and the economic base, such as we saw in the case of the misalignment between the ideological constitution of the aristocratic subject and the demands imposed upon them by their changing position in the class structure of their social formations.
4. The identification of a homology between conceptual or ideological elements and economic or more broadly social ones can serve as a starting point for investigation and indicator of a connection between those elements and their conditions of possibility, but this identification must be surpassed to offer a proper explanation.
5. A key element of any such explanation is a functional account of the taking up of certain of the objective contents of such a homology into thought.
6. Such a functional account should involve the two moments of class-situated *response* to the objective situation and subjective project

---

<sup>129</sup> See Appendix 1 for a more in depth examination of this principle.

oriented towards intervening in class struggle—and so acting on the objective conditions that solicited the response.

Principles 4–6 in particular represent the methodological *results* of the investigation undertaken here, and though they remain open to revision or qualification on the basis of further study, I believe that they provide a strong foundation upon which to conduct such study. One way of viewing such a contribution is as an extension of the Hegelian determination of the concept as purposive activity that takes up and transforms its external conditions, and its Marxist reformulation in terms of labor, to the question of the socio-historical determination of philosophy.<sup>130</sup> From this perspective, we could generalize them into the principle that *the determination of thought by its objective conditions always involves activity on the part of individuals according to their subjective purposes in relation to those conditions*.

## 4.2. Historical Conclusions

On the side of the historical content of the emergence and development of the concept of essence, the conclusions outlined at the end of Section 3.3 provide us with a starting point for constructing a broader narrative of that development up to the present. At the same time, we cannot assume a continuity in either the content or function of the concept of essence after this first phase, and so that construction would require a renewed effort of historical reconstruction of the development of both the concept itself and the conditions in which it developed. It is very possible that its persistence and development, if these can be established, resulted from its taking on different functions for different individuals and class fractions in different periods and circumstances. There is also a need for examining other regions like India and China in which a concept of essence seemed to emerge independently around the same time and incorporating those developments into our overall narrative.<sup>131</sup> Additionally, it seems likely that in attempting to track the further development of the concept of essence after its emergence, further attention would need to be paid to the relative autonomy of philosophical development as it matures and becomes institutionalized. Still, the above

---

<sup>130</sup> For the Hegelian conception of the concept, see Karen Ng, "From Actuality to the Concept in Hegel's Logic" in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. Dean Moyar (Oxford University Press, 2017). For the Marxist conception, see Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 75. See also Appendix 1.

<sup>131</sup> Seaford's *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient China* could provide a good starting point for this work.

account of the relationship between money and the concept of essence suggests a few candidates for explaining the apparent persistence of that concept under different modes of production and concrete circumstances that seem like fruitful areas for further investigation.

The first is the connection between the reconfiguration of truth and the emergence of essence. Since it was the monetized objectification of the social presuppositions that determined the contours of the reconfiguration of truth at the heart of the emergence of the concept of essence, this also seems like a good place to look in terms of generating research questions on the basis of which to investigate the persistence of that concept. Is there a persistent connection between the determinations of essence and the role of money as a preposition of social production? Or between essence (or truth) and the general presuppositions regardless of whether or not these are monetary? Or, is this just a condition of their emergence that ceases to play a role in their persistence as time goes on? What happens when capital takes up both the monetary and non-monetary presuppositions into its own process of realization? Similarly, it seems like the negative conditioning of that emergence due to the inability to recognize the substance of value raises a similar set of questions. In particular, the question of whether the persistence of the displacement at the core of the emergence of the concept of essence has its basis in a continuing inability to recognize the equality and interdependence of human labor seems fruitful, and I have already given some provisional indications of how this continuity might manifest itself under capitalist relations of production in note 126. These are just two possible avenues of inquiry suggested by the project undertaken above, but I think they already provide a more promising basis for developing a concrete account of the history of the concept of essence than those currently available.

### 4.3. Practical Conclusions

There is a significant historical distance between the object of my investigation here and revolutionary practice in the present day that makes it harder to evaluate its practical significance, so all of the following will have an even more provisional and suggestive character than even the historical conclusions discussed above. Still, I think elements of the research conducted here can help direct our attention in some pertinent directions in terms of developing a marxist concept of essence adequate to the task of facilitating contemporary revolutionary praxis. Before getting into this, I think it is important to point out that my research

has led me to rethink Marcuse's assumption that truth is a subordinate determination of the concept of essence, and to recognize that it was rather essence that appeared to be a form of the concept of truth, a reconfiguration of it on the basis of changing material conditions and ideological imperatives. It will take further research to determine how this relationship continued to be reconfigured over time, so, for now I will speak of the concept of essence with the understanding that it may in fact be the concept of truth in general that I'm attempting to refer to.

The first practical consideration I want to discuss has to do with the points made in section 3.3 about the function of essence as both a reality schema used to ground practico-ideological reorientation and as a means of legitimization of the place of the ruling class in the mode of exploitation. On the one hand, I think that the connection between essence and legitimization calls into question its usefulness for a revolutionary project, in which case it might only be the critique of the concept of essence that is useful to us—insofar as it provides us with a means of dispelling the connection between reality indexing and legitimization propagated by that concept. On the other hand, any revolutionary project itself needs a means of effecting practico-ideological reorientation on the basis of current realities, and this might be one of the ways in which a Marxist concept of essence would be valuable, although it would require disentangling these two functions in such a way that its reality schema could be based not on the reproduction of the current relations of production but instead on their overthrow. How to do this, and whether we need to, remain open questions, but I think the research undertaken here has provided a useful basis for beginning to think these questions through.

The second practical consideration relates to the negative grounds discussed near the end of section 3.3 and to Marcuse's assertion of a relation between essence and freedom. I hope that my overall argument has served to dispel the notion that the concept of essence has any positive connection to any substantive idea of freedom that is not premised on exploitation. At the same time, I do think that the role of the negative grounds of an inability to recognize the equality and interdependence posited by the money form could indicate a negative and indirect relationship between the concept of essence and freedom, although this would require more historical work to verify. If the inability to recognize this content and/or opposition to the implications of its realization continued to provide a foundation for the maintenance of the projected determinations of money as metaphysical determinations in the concept of essence, then we should see this content as the continually returning repressed content that haunts thought throughout

the history of philosophy, and the concept of essence as preserving the possibility of the realization of equality and interdependence in a negative manner, as that which cannot be realized in order for it to continue to function conceptually. We could also see this as part of the reason why the concept of essence is able to function as a reality schema for monetized social totality, which itself relies on the non-realization of substantive equality and direct interdependence in order to continue to exist as self-externalized social totality. Ultimately, freedom, in its adequate form as collective self-determination, is derivative of these latter determinations insofar as it is premised on the absence of exploitation and the directly collective self-determination of social production and reproduction, without which the possibility of purposive control of the production apparatus and the free mediation of the relationship between human beings and nature according to consciously determined purposes are impossible. Whether we determine that it is solely the critique of the concept of essence or also its reformulation that facilitates revolutionary practice today, we should take this primacy of equality and interdependence into account and orient ourselves more towards them than towards the freedom that would follow from them, or, in other words, we should orient ourselves towards freedom only insofar as it is seen as a product of the instantiation of substantive equality and collective mediation of our interdependent social production.

## Bibliography

- ALTHUSSER, LOUIS. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. London and New York: Verso, 2014.
- ARISTOTLE. "Politics". In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, volume 2. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014a. doi:10.1515/9781400835850.
- . "Rhetoric". In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, volume 2 of *Bollingen Series (General)*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014b.
- CARUGATI, FEDERICA. "Athens Before the Crisis". In *Creating a Constitution: Law, Democracy, and Growth in Ancient Athens*, 21–37. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.
- DE STE. CROIX, G. E. M. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: from*

- the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests. New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- DETIENNE, MARCEL. *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*. New York: Zone Books, 1999.
- FINLEY, MOSES I. *The World of Odysseus*. New York: New York Review Books, 2002.
- . *The Ancient Economy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.
- GAGARIN, MICHAEL. *Democratic Law in Classical Athens*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020.
- HANSON, VICTOR DAVIS. "The Hoplite Narrative". In *Men of Bronze: Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece*, edited by Donald Kagan and Gregory F. Viggiano. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- HARRIS, EDWARD M. "A New Solution to the Riddle of the Seisachtheia". In *The Development of the Polis in Archaic Greece*, edited by Lynette G. Mitchell and P.J. Rhodes, 64. London: Routledge, 1997.
- HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- . *The Science of Logic*. Translated by George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- HEIDEGGER, MARTIN. "What Is Metaphysics? Original Version / Was ist Metaphysik? Urfassung:". *Philosophy Today* 62 (2018): 733–751. doi:10.5840/philtoday20181024232.
- JAMESON, FREDRIC. *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton NJ: Princeton university press, 1974.
- . *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- KASSAM, CHRIS AND ROBBIE DUSCHINSKY. "Heraclitus, Seaford, and Reversible Exchange". *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31 (2017)(4): 609–633. URL <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.31.4.0609>.
- KNODELL, ALEX R. *Societies in Transition in Early Greece: An Archaeological History*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021.

- LAPLANCHE, JEAN AND JEAN-BERTRAND PONTALIS. *The Language of Psycho-analysis*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Routledge, 2018.
- MARCUSE, HERBERT. "The Concept of Essence". In *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, 31–64. London: Mayfly Books, 2009.
- MARX, KARL. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Progress Publishers, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844". In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 2ns edition. New York: Norton, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes, volume 1 of *Penguin classics*. London and New York: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. Penguin classics, London, 1993.
- MILIOS, JOHN AND DIMITRIS P. SOTIROPOULOS. *Rethinking Imperialism: A Study of Capitalist Rule*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. doi: 10.1057/9780230250642.
- OSBORNE, ROBIN. *Greece in the Making: 1200 - 479 BC*. 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2009.
- SARTRE, JEAN-PAUL. *Search for a Method*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Knopf, 1963.
- SEAFORD, RICHARD. *Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- SHABEL, LISA. "Kant's "Argument from Geometry"". *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (2004): 195–215. doi:10.1353/hph.2004.0034.
- SOHN RETHEL, ALFRED. *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*. Translated by Martin Sohn-Rethel. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021.
- THEOGNIS. "The Elegiac Poems of Theognis". In *Elegy and Iambus*, edited by J.M. Edmonds, volume vol. 1, 1931.
- XENOPHANES AND HERACLITUS. *Early Greek Philosophy: Early Ionian Thinkers, Part 2*, volume vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.



# On the Falsity of Prevailing Ideas: The Concept of Ideology in Early Critical Theory

Samuel J. Thomas

## 1. Introduction

Writers have spilled rivers of ink over the term “ideology.” This steady flow has become a deluge of mediocre tomes from uninquisitive minds. The result of this flood is that the term now usually connotes a mere pejorative rather than anything of substance. Anyone who wishes to avoid submersion must seek higher ground. Yet academia has shown itself to be a lowland compared to those who have merged theoretical insight with practical activity. It is little wonder, then, that the most coherent conceptions of ideology come from those who stand in large part outside the academy. For this reason, any investigation into ideology must start with the insight of the Young Marx, who noted that philosophy had contended itself with criticizing thought in its abstract form. This was a half-complete task; it did not criticize the real conditions which give rise to illusory abstractions.<sup>1</sup> If the Young Prussian was correct that on the other side of the antinomy stood the proletariat, ready to pick up theory as a weapon of its own emancipation, then it should be unsurprising that the most thorough critics of ideology stand on its side.

The ambiguous relationship of the Frankfurt School to academia provided fertile ground for a critical theory of ideology. This ambiguity was not of the members’ volition. Misfortunes asserted themselves upon the group but also allowed for reason to work its cunning. The concept of ideology played a central role in the Frankfurt School from the time of Horkheimer’s ascent as director of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (IfS). Of course, the Frankfurt School was not the first to investigate the concept. Indeed, one of the first treatments of the concept in the Frankfurt School corpus criticizes extant theories of ideology. However, by dint of their influence and voluminous output, the Frankfurt School’s conception of ideology is a watershed moment in the development of the

---

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction” from *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 53-65.

concept. At its head during these halcyon years was Max Horkheimer, who somewhat facetiously accepted previous director Carl Grünberg's description of the IfS as a "dictatorship of the director."<sup>2</sup> His productive

---

<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy" from *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 11.

Horkheimer's assumption of Grünberg's term "dictatorship of the director" may raise questions about the extent to which the IfS is modeled like a dictatorship of the proletariat or a Leninist vanguard party. A dictatorship of the director is not a vanguard party which seeks to enlighten the masses. Nevertheless, an excursus on vanguardism sheds light on social intellectual labor, and so is worth undertaking as an aside in the footnotes. One may attempt to hurl any number of objections toward vanguardism on the grounds of its alleged ideological bent. The self-aggrandizement necessary to believe oneself to be part of a political vanguard may prevent the vanguard's members from seeing the world non-ideologically. These charges are inapplicable for a few reasons. First, the common target of such criticisms, the party form as Lenin sketches it in *What is to be Done?*, does not always contain the vanguardist viewpoint straw manned by its objectors. A minority view, holds that the aim of the 1902 work is to develop a fraction within a mass party (implicitly a mass party based on the German SPD of the time), not a vanguard in itself, and hence the claim that Lenin called for paternalism over the proletariat is dubious at best (See Hal Draper, "The Myth of Lenin's 'Concept Of The Party': Or What They Did To What Is To Be Done?", *Historical Materialism* 4, no 1 (1999): 187-214, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920699100414373>). Only after the Bolshevik-Menshevik split and in the context of an ongoing civil war did the RSDLP(b) abandon support for internal factions (RSDLP (b), "Resolution On Party Unity" from *X Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)* (Moscow: 16 March 1921).)

Second, the concept of ideology that is in play for the vanguard differs from that of the Frankfurt School. Lenin does not deduce from the claim that workers will not spontaneously progress from trade-union to Social-Democratic consciousness the claim that one must obfuscate reality, but rather that one must uncover it (V. I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (New York: International Publishers, 2005), 31-2). While Raymond Geuss uses the term "ideology in the positive sense" (Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 22-4) to refer to the intellectual side of party work, this is a misnomer if we wish to remain loyal to the use of the term among the members of the IfS. Ideology is neither agitation (few ideas to many people) nor propaganda (many ideas to few people), since it does not always involve the deliberate propagation of ideas.

A third, more important point is that the purpose of a vanguard is not to engage in contemplation but to change the mode of production. Of course, one major theme of the IfS was its attempt to bridge theory and praxis. However, in the case of vanguardism, all intellectual activity is practically oriented, and hence no attachment to academia is necessary or even beneficial. As Horkheimer notes, the vanguard's purpose as world-changing renders criticisms of vanguard parties based on liberal modes of thought invalid, as "[b]ourgeois modes of thought are adapted to the economic system that gave rise to them. But prevailing patterns of thought do not apply to the political movement which attempts to put a better society in place of the present one" (Max Horkheimer, "A Discussion About Revolution" from *Dawn & Decline*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1978, 40). Therefore, "[b]ourgeois criticism of the proletarian struggle is a logical impossibility" (*Ibid.*). This does not entail that a good critique of ideology entails good politics or vice versa. The political impulses in revolutionary leadership are still good even though their

flurry during his stint as the head of the IfS deserves special consideration for both its historical breadth and theoretical acumen. It is for this reason that the essay will focus predominantly on Horkheimer, though it will at times refer to other members of the IfS as needed.

Horkheimer's 1930 critique of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* is a fruitful starting point for an explanation of the critical theory of ideology. Mannheim's theory not only has historical importance but is also a useful case study in how abstract and value-free theories of ideology content themselves with retreating to abstraction rather than explaining how ideology functions in the social reproduction of concrete life. By contrast, the theory of ideology that the *Institut für Sozialforschung* develops is an antidote to these common maladies. Hence, this essay first describes Horkheimer's criticism of Mannheim in section 2 before laying out the concept of ideology that Horkheimer developed during the 30s. Those unfamiliar with Mannheim's sociology of knowledge should consult Appendix 3 to orient themselves before continuing.

After laying out Horkheimer's critique of Mannheim, the essay then turns to Horkheimer proper. This section, section 3, forms the bulk of the essay (for obvious reasons), and is for that reason divided into subsections. Subsection 3.1 mainly summarizes the main problems with the sociology of knowledge and lists the pitfalls that a critical theory of ideology should avoid. Next, subsection 3.2 distinguishes between *Ideologietheorie* and *Ideologiekritik*, and I argue that these two moments of a critical theory of ideology are both present in Horkheimer's early work. As one of the primary pitfalls of the sociology of knowledge is its methodology, subsection 3.3 covers methodological matters, arguing that the proper means to analyze ideology in capitalist social relations requires the adoption of a dialectical method. After the methodological background, subsection 3.4 deals with ideology *theory*, arguing that Horkheimer's conception of ideology views it as playing a specific *functional* role in class relations. Subsection 3.5 deals with the other half of the formula: the *critical* moment of the critical theory of ideology. Throughout this analysis, one sees the contraposition of ideology as falsehood to the concept of *totality*. Consequently, subsection 3.6 provides some further contextualization of totality as a concept. As the reader may wish for a concrete example of the critical theory of ideology, I end section 3 by recapitulating Horkheimer's analysis of the bourgeois revolutionary and applying it to Tommaso Campanella. The essay then concludes by flagging some further areas for research.

---

theory of ideology was deficient.

## 2. Horkheimer's Critique of Mannheim

Horkheimer begins his critique of Mannheim with a methodological point. Mannheim treats Marxist thought as part of his “sociology of knowledge” which explains a social totality. Yet the *true* purpose of Marxist thought is to change the world, not to explain it.<sup>3</sup> While Horkheimer sees some value in Mannheim’s work, he does not think it beyond reproach. Mannheim sees the purpose of the sociology of knowledge as not a partisan tool but as a “sociological history of thought.” This intellectual field seems impossible to water, as even the sociologist’s worldview is situationally determined. Hence, the prospect of impartiality in the sociology of knowledge is grim. The sociology of knowledge aims to provide us a way out of the academic crisis of the era, in which “faith in the unconditional validity of the various world views [sic] has been fundamentally shaken.”<sup>4</sup>

Mannheim distinguishes between *particular* and *total* ideologies. The former consists in ascribing the origin of a *specific* belief to bias or interest. By contrast, the latter casts doubt on an entire opposing *Weltanschauung*. Much like Kant’s claim that the judgments of experience are the result of our application of the categories, Mannheim argues that our worldviews are the result of categories that are the result of our given situational determination. We thus do not think universally; our social group conditions our thought. Thus, not only *what* we know is subject to situational determination, but *how* we think. Hence, the charge of false consciousness has become universalized. Though he invokes false consciousness, Mannheim wants a generalized version of ideology that is not restricted to Marxism.<sup>5</sup> While Mannheim claims that the total conception of ideology has its *origins* in Marxist thought, accusations of total ideology are somewhat novel.<sup>6</sup> To prevent lapsing into philosophical relativism, Mannheim distinguishes between his thesis of situational determination and relativism. The former merely entails that all thought is ultimately rooted in “a definite social situation.”<sup>7</sup> This *sociological* claim does not require the sociologist of knowledge to take sides and give a moral *evaluation* of an ideological dispute. The sociologist of knowledge is not an ethicist. They do not judge the moral soundness of a worldview,

<sup>3</sup> Max Horkheimer, “A New Concept of Ideology”? from *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 129.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

but only describe it. In effect, Mannheim's system is the *inverse* of the meta-ethical expressivism that would become popular a few years later in the Anglosphere.<sup>8</sup> For both the expressivist and the sociologist of knowledge, there is a strict fact-value distinction. Hence, there is also a strict separation between the act of describing a claim and judging its moral status.<sup>9</sup> For the expressivist, moral claims do not *describe* any mind-independent facts about ethics. Moral language only expresses the speaker's approval or disapproval of the act in question, or aims to arouse similar sentiments in others.<sup>10</sup> The sociologist of knowledge *describes* the sociological fact that people's ideas spring forth from their situational determination without commanding or condemning. Just as the expressivist is not in the business of describing the world, the sociologist of knowledge is not in the business of judging it.

Despite this point of agreement with expressivists, Mannheim is no positivist. His approach diverges from positivism due to his insistence on the *historical* element of truth. While positivism held fast to the adage that "facts are stubborn things," Mannheim insisted that there was no ahistorical unified truth that could survive unblemished. Rather, the validity of a system of thought depends on its historical moment.<sup>11</sup> Ideologies have a temporal validity. What was once a valid system of thought may lose its validity. By contrast, some ideologies are *utopian* because their appearance is too hasty. Utopian ideologies are invalid *now* but gain validity *later*.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the sociologist of knowledge determines the truth or falsity of an ideology in relation to a definite historical period. Hence, false consciousness is theoretically and normatively antiquated consciousness. It is a consciousness whose retrograde elements *obscure* rather than *clarify*. The historical moment is the yardstick by which one measures the truth of an ideology. Thus, contra the logical empiricists, truths are not independent, ahistorical entities, but *dynamic*.

To return to 1930, Mannheim diagnoses methodological pluralism

<sup>8</sup> See A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London, Penguin Books: 1971).

<sup>9</sup> Though perhaps in different ways, since the expressivism in vogue at the time held fast to a positivism wherein every truth was either analytic a priori or a posteriori, empirical, and contingent. Hence Mannheim's Kantian leanings might rub at odds with the Anglophone dismissal of the synthetic a priori.

<sup>10</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 110-1.

<sup>11</sup> Horkheimer, "A New Concept," 132.

<sup>12</sup> The obvious example here (though Horkheimer does not give it explicitly) is the utopian socialism of Thomas Müntzer, the Conspiracy of Equals, Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Robert Owen, all of whom saw the utopian element of socialism but whose appearance *pre festum* meant that the categories of thought had were ill-suited to a historical situation with insufficiently developed productive forces.

as the cause of the crisis in thought.<sup>13</sup> Each thought system can grasp bits of the truth and reconcile it to its methodological best practices. But differences in individual social standpoints entail that there is a seeming lack of organic unity in the present. At present, there are several ideologies that are at least in part irreconcilable. These stem from different ways of looking at the world that are situationally determined. The sociology of knowledge seeks to overcome intellectual fragmentation by attempting to stand outside ideologies. In so doing, it aims to show ideologies to be the result of definite historical processes, with the aim of freeing people from their historical determinations.<sup>14</sup>

The trouble is that Mannheim misuses Marx. Marx “wanted to transform philosophy into positive science and praxis.”<sup>15</sup> Mannheim eschews this task and returns to metaphysics. Mannheim wants to use the sociology of knowledge to reach a higher truth that stands outside the constraints of ideology. Yet he also claims that the truth we reach is not “valid for all times and for all human beings.”<sup>16</sup> Mannheim is far from the only person whose denial of a generally valid philosophical system leads to problems.<sup>17</sup> Still, his conflation of the development of humanity inside ideologies and historical progress outside the realm of ideology renders ideological entities metaphysically strange.<sup>18</sup> Mannheim’s theory cannot appeal to an atemporal human essence given his commitment to the claim that our beliefs are situationally determined. Despite this, he still appeals to an abstract, atemporal human essence. Mannheim wants to *both* have the plurality of ideologies point to a situational determination of total ideologies which cast doubt on a unifying human essence, and at the same time appeal to some transhistorical humanity, “the essence of which all existing persons carry within themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Mannheim makes the same mistake that classical idealist philosophy made. That is, he posits humanity as a metaphysical entity that is unlike any other and does not correspond to the lives of flesh and blood people. But the argument for giving human essence a prime position in the theory is weak. Abstract humanity is an entity which stands outside

<sup>13</sup> Horkheimer, “A New Concept,” 133.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Per Horkheimer, this is also a problem for Dilthey, who thought we could understand human nature in retrospect. Dilthey’s appeal to some Ur-principles makes sense given the rest of his philosophical commitments, but this is not a route available to Mannheim.

<sup>18</sup> Horkheimer, “A New Concept,” 135.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

the behaviors and motivations of sensuous human activity. It thus cannot explain real human behavior and thought. In effect, Horkheimer shows that Mannheim's appeal to human essence falls prey to a Mackie-esque Argument from Queerness.<sup>20</sup> If there *were* a human essence, it would be an entity "of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in"<sup>21</sup> Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. The concept of a general total conception of ideology militates *against* some transhistorical essence which escapes situational determination. Thus, the entire edifice of Mannheim's theory rests on a foundational essence which the theory states cannot exist.

A similar problem befalls Mannheim's conception of history. This theory does not point to determinate historical entities but appeals to a "realm beyond history."<sup>22</sup> Once again, Mannheim confuses the concept of humanity as such for flesh and blood people. The *real* struggles which claim the lives of millions in their conflagrations "are not the 'real' things toward which our investigations are directed."<sup>23</sup> Rather, what counts is the conceptual apparatus which changes according to one's situational determination. Reality *as such* holds no importance beyond the conceptual apparatus through which one views it. But does this not *also* apply to the concept of a transhistorical human essence? Once one forgoes the appeal to transcendent humanity, then one is only left with the claim that standpoints are an important part of an overall historical process. Manheim even imbues this belief with a mystical flair which gains a secularized coat of paint via an appeal to historical processes. Again, Horkheimer criticizes Mannheim for his inconsistency. The latter eschews the idea of an eternally valid viewpoint, but qualifies this by claiming that "the ontological decisions according to which we experience and analyze facts increasingly reveals an overarching meaning."<sup>24</sup> But his appeals to humanity are themselves ideological at base. Mannheim's appeals to "essence" and "humanity" depend on a conceptual apparatus that his sociological framework casts doubt upon. Even if there *were* such abstracta, Mannheim's system gives us a reason to believe that we would be categorically unable to know them. Much like Mackie's critique of ethics, *if* some transcendent meaning of history existed, our knowledge of it could only occur through "some special

<sup>20</sup> See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), 38-42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>22</sup> Horkheimer, "A New Concept," 137.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 137-8.

faculty of [...] perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.”<sup>25</sup> Appealing to metaphysical systems which posit such entities as a given is not a solution. These systems are ones which Mannheim’s system gives us reason to doubt.<sup>26</sup>

Despite his Kantian pretensions, Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge requires dogmatism to buttress it. This is not a problem for the revolutionary critique of ideology, as it tries to do away with metaphysical superstitions. By contrast, Mannheim seeks to ossify them. Marx was correct to cast doubt on abstract humanity as a substitute for flesh and blood men. Hence, Mannheim views the human essence as the subject of history, but for Marx it is the concrete human being “in a definite historical moment.”<sup>27</sup> To insist on the former is to think ideologically and dismiss “the real sufferings of economically underprivileged classes.”<sup>28</sup> History, then, “cannot possibly be the expression of some meaningful whole,”<sup>29</sup> but is the result of contradictions between men. Materialism has no predefined schema; it cannot stipulate some *telos* of history. To do so would let it lapse back into the very vagaries it attempts to avoid. Mannheim appeals to abstract entities like a human essence to avoid the charge of relativism. Yet the charge of relativism itself is based on a static ontology which is suspect.<sup>30</sup> There is no transcendent principle of truth to which to appeal. Hence, Mannheim’s own relativization of all conceptions is itself relative. Horkheimer notes that since “all our ideas [...] depend upon conditions that may change, [...] the notion of an eternal truth which outlives all perceiving subjects is untenable.”<sup>31</sup> This does not entail scientific skepticism. While the content of the claims that science makes (e.g., about nature) extend beyond the lifetime of humanity, the claims themselves “express something about the relationship of humanity and nature [...] but nothing about the relation of truth and being in general.”<sup>32</sup> Mannheim, by contrast, judges the charge of relativism by the yardstick of eternal truth. Despite this, his system casts doubt on eternal truth *tout court*.

For Mannheim, particular ideology is particular because the conditional nature of the determining social situation bars the bearer of any particular ideology from making claims to absolute truth. But the claim

<sup>25</sup> Mackie, *Ethics*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Horkheimer, “A New Concept,” 138.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

of situational determination is incoherent, since it presumes that it itself is not situationally determined; it thereby treats standpoints under the aspect of eternity.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Mannheim intended situational determination to avoid the charge of relativism by focusing on the pragmatic upshot of beliefs. But this confuses the true and false with genuine and spurious. Mannheim treats the concept of ideology as one which has intensified and radicalized over time. It blossoms from a particular ideology to a total conception of ideology. From there, the specialized total conception of ideology allows for a general total conception of ideology. This general total conception of ideology creates the possibility of a sociology of knowledge. This sketch includes the claim that ideology has become so totalized that one may treat it with systematic rigor. Yet Horkheimer claims that this unrelenting focus on the general does not do justice to the particular.<sup>34</sup> To trace the implications of ideology, as Mannheim does, does not necessarily make it a good theoretical tool. Many scientific theories have failed to prove useful after deep inquiry. There is no guarantee that Mannheim's theory of ideology would prove different.

Moreover, Mannheim depoliticized ideology, especially in the move between particular and total conceptions of ideology. In so doing, he worsens the analysis by failing to account for the link between the political and economic distribution of power and the social concepts in play.<sup>35</sup> When moving to the total conception of ideology, one must now subject an entire *Weltanschauung* to ideological critique. In so doing, Mannheim stresses the need to treat nearly everything as ideological. This universalization transforms the concept from a definite accusation to dogmatic metaphysics. This itself is a manifestation of false consciousness. It replaces interests or empirical facts with a vulgar reflection theory as the explanans. Mannheim must also reject modern psychology, which explains the development of men's ideas in terms of their external needs. For Mannheim, the development of ideas does not depend on real people's lives, but from their social strata.<sup>36</sup> This "correspondence of form"<sup>37</sup> occurs not only at the level of economic class (as is the case in Vulgar Marxism), but also implies a distinct set of aesthetic, metaphysical, and moral categories in the members of the stratum. Mannheim's theory relies on ideal types of people, to whom correspond beliefs and world-

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

views. In doing so, one can afterward “reconstruct” the social situation in which the ideology emerges. This reconstruction should avoid value judgments. This process prevents one from viewing the social situation as a totality, as it reduces it to a mere amalgamation of different viewpoints. Moreover, such a total conception of ideology proves to be as much of an “idealistic overextension”<sup>38</sup> as the concept of a human essence. The total concept of ideology depends on the notion of a totality of consciousness, a totality “in the sense of a superficial concept of the whole.”<sup>39</sup> While such a totality has merit in biology and psychology, it cannot be the case in ideology. This is because people’s consciousness is bound up with the social and environmental surroundings. That is, it is intertwined with definite material social relations.<sup>40</sup> This does not entail a strict mind-to-world parallelism. The development of a person does not always mirror the development of their society. *Weltanschauungen* do not develop apart from the socioeconomic conditions in which they appear. To pretend that they are freestanding intellectual constructs is idealist nonsense. Mannheim eschews the non-autonomy of thought from material conditions in favor of a psychological framework which emerges in a sociohistorical reality. In so doing, he merely reinvents the Hegelian *Volksgeist* with different verbiage. By ignoring the role of power and struggle, Mannheim treats the relationship between an individual and his ideology as if it were deterministic rather than as the result of everyday struggle.<sup>41</sup> Thus, for Mannheim, the struggle between ideologies stands apart and above the struggle between definite individuals. At one plane of struggle is the struggle of determinate individuals, on another is a struggle between ideologies. The relationship between these two planes is unclear at best.

By a *general* total concept of ideology, Mannheim means that intellectuals understand that situational determination limits *every* ideology, including one’s own. As such, no ideology can reach eternally valid truth. This renders every pattern of thought ideological. Since Mannheim strips ideology of its accusatory nature, he renders it meaningless. Now, the term merely signifies that a claim lacks access to a mind-independent truth. All ideologies are born in the original sin of situational determination. To be consistent, one must give an account of the categories that one is using, including what “being” and *Weltanschauungen* are. In contrast to the general total concept of ideology is the *special*

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 145.

conception of the total concept of ideology. In the special conception, one merely puts into question *competing* ideologies. The special conception shows promise in giving an account of the relevant categories.<sup>42</sup> This is most prominent with Mannheim's ambiguous relationship to Marxism. When talking about the special conception, Mannheim uses Marxism as the ideology with which to criticize all others. On the other hand, Mannheim treats Marxism as one ideology among many which is subject to the critiques of the general conception of total ideology. Thus, Mannheim critiques Marxism but appeals to certain categories of class society uncritically. But without *some* categories of thought, situational determination loses its meaning, as there are no sociological structures which determine individuals' ideological beliefs. Without an account of society, Mannheim's account of situational determination falls apart because it is underdefined. Thus, each ideology may use its own categories when defining situational determination. Marxists can interpret it along lines of social classes and relations of production while idealists may interpret it according to *Volksgeister*, and so on. Mannheim's invocation of a social situation is too vague. Horkheimer approvingly cites Troeltsch, who claims that "society" is an ambiguous term and overly abstract unless anchored in economic relations. As it stands, though, the sociology of knowledge lacks the categories which can carve society into the ideal types to which ideologies are situationally determined. This renders it meaningless.

A similar problem applies to Mannheim's notion of ideological appropriateness. Mannheim also must resort to a spiritual examination of the criteria of ideological appropriateness. He grounds the appropriateness of an ideology to its "correctness" to its time (i.e., not obsolete or utopian). But this correctness is itself not based on "an explicit, scientific theory of society."<sup>43</sup> Thus, correctness becomes arbitrary, epoch-based, and circular. Consider Mannheim's example of an obsolete ideology: that of a landed proprietor who still views his *de facto* capitalist estate through the lens of feudal social relations. If viewing the estate in this way is obsolete, it is so thanks to some *non-ideological* metric. Basing "one's commitment to this theory on the grounds of its appropriateness to the epoch, which is precisely the basis upon which the theory is to be judged, would be circular."<sup>44</sup> Mannheim restricts the analysis of ideology to the cognitive realm. This makes the landowner's failure a mere epistemic matter. In doing so, he ignores the *social* function of ideology:

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 148.

i.e., how ideology shapes reality. As a result, Mannheim's analysis of ideology is one-sided and overly abstract. It analyzes social life as it stands but otherwise leaves social life unexamined. Even when analyzing a specific *Weltanschauung*, Mannheim does not connect the ideology to its social effects or the relations that bearers of that thought have to the world around them.<sup>45</sup> Despite its sociological façade, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge contents itself with reintroducing a pseudo-Hegelian philosophy of *Geist* that Marx superseded. Hence, Horkheimer concludes that "Mannheim distinguishes himself from those irresponsible philosophers whose blindness he claims is caused by their persistence in a "'higher' realm" (104) only in that he returns there himself with a few weapons from the arsenal of Marxism."<sup>46</sup>

### 3. A Critical Theory of Ideology

#### 3.1. A Negative Example

At first glance, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge provides us with an excellent *negative example*: that is, an example which shows us what to *avoid*. There are 3 interrelated problems with the model that one would be wise to avoid. First, Mannheim's model posits strange metaphysical entities which should not exist by the model's own suppositions. These entities include the appeal to a transcendental, ahistorical humanity. The theory of situational determination cannot explain the existence of such entities. The ideal type which corresponds to an ideology is another example. It putatively stands in for groups of flesh and blood people. Yet this entity stands over and above the conceptual schema that said flesh and blood people use in everyday life.

This is due to a second pitfall with the model, Mannheim's attempt to give a value-free analysis of ideology *causes* him to rely on such metaphysical entities. The net result of this is that, despite its scientific pretensions, the sociology of knowledge *loses* explanatory power when compared to a less metaphysically cumbersome theory. This is most notable with the pseudo-normative concept of utopia. A utopian ideology is a state of mind which "is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs."<sup>47</sup> Describing an ideology as utopian runs into

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 149

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 173. Annoyingly, despite Louis Wirth being involved in both this translation and the translation used in the Horkheimer translation,

one of two problems. Either it is circular, as appropriateness to the era is the “basis upon which the theory [of utopia] is to be judged,”<sup>48</sup> or it posits a temporal appropriateness as some entity which stands *outside* situational determination. If the latter is the case, then the theory of utopia must rely on a concept of “nonideological” correctness:<sup>49</sup> an entity which the theory says cannot exist, as such an entity would have to stand *outside* situational determination.

The concept of utopianism falls prey to a third problem with the theory. That the quasi-normative description of utopianism does not solve the previous problem because Mannheim adds the normative concepts *post hoc*. Hence, the concept has no grounding in the theory itself. The extent to which utopianism is a normative concept is unclear. By reducing ideology to a cognitive framework, Mannheim reduces utopianism to a mere epistemic fault.

What would a critical theory of ideology that avoids these pitfalls look like? Remarkably like that of the early Frankfurt School. Thus, what follows is a sketch of the critical theory of ideology as present in the *Institut für Sozialforschung* during its heyday in the 1930s, a sketch which avoids the pitfalls of the sociology of knowledge.

### 3.2. Roadmap

At this juncture, one must distinguish between two interwoven but nonetheless distinguishable tasks that any critical theory of ideology must provide. On the one hand, it must provide an *Ideologietheorie*: a theory of how ideologies function and the role they play in larger social structures. On the other hand, it must provide an *Ideologiekritik*: it must show that the ideologies in question obscure or render unintelligible some facts of social life. The received wisdom regarding the Frankfurt School is that it had the latter but lacked the former. This received wisdom is false, as it ignores the way in which both concepts are intertwined for the first generation of Critical Theorists. In what follows, I show that the Frankfurt School’s development of an *Ideologietheorie* is rather quite prominent, so long as one knows where to look. In particular, the Frankfurt School’s functionalism places ideology within the context of capitalist social relations. Afterward, I show that the Frankfurt School’s *adjectival* conception of ideology provides the critical half of the equation, giving ideology an *obfuscatory* role regarding immanent

---

the pagination is different.

<sup>48</sup> Horkheimer, “A New Concept,” 148.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 147.

contradictions in social relations.

A few words on what constitutes a critical theory of ideology are in order. The *critical* element is not vacuously filled by any subjection of assumptions to scrutiny. Indeed, this element is ostensibly part of the most vulgar bourgeois critiques of ideology that emerged during the early modern period, i.e., the ascendent era of capitalism in Europe. However, the articulation of ideology critique in capitalist society both then and now is class-based, as Horkheimer notes that “the criticism of the system [of relations that reproduce capitalist social life] is to be the prerogative of those who have an interest in it.”<sup>50</sup> Criticism in the bourgeois sense is counterposed to *resentment*, which is reserved to those “who have the opportunity to know [capitalism’s] underside.”<sup>51</sup> Bourgeois thought in its skeptical form is welcoming toward criticism, so long as “critical tendencies [are] voiced only toward fantasies—so-called ideologies—and not at all toward things as they are.”<sup>52</sup> This renders criticism impotent as it considers theory as “relative and separate from praxis.”<sup>53</sup> This impotence stems from a misconception about the relationship between ideology and materialism: “the foundation of authoritarian domination lies not in the delusions with which it rationalizes itself, but in the social structure of production that rules the age and shapes of the character of human beings according to their place within it.”<sup>54</sup> Hence, for the Frankfurt School, *Ideologiekritik*, and by extension the critical theory of ideology, is not a mere intellectual exercise, but a task that exposes the immanent contradictions of bourgeois thought for its supersession.

But in raising this point about the nature of criticism, I have inevitably stumbled across the question of *methodology*. After all, if the mere academic exercise of exposing illusions does not suffice for a critical theory of ideology, what other steps are necessary? As we have seen, Mannheim’s conception of social determination is too abstract and imprecise to function as a starting point. To that end, the following section explains the methodological principles which the Frankfurt School uses in its quest.

---

<sup>50</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Concerning Resentment” from *Dawn & Decline* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 31.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Horkheimer, “Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism” from *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 296.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3. Non-Autonomy of Thought from Activity

Recall that one problem with Mannheim's conception of ideology is that it is too vague and therefore allows the reader to insert their preferred theory of ideology into the account. To avoid this pitfall, one must use a different method than Mannheim's, lest it fall prey to the very same indeterminate metaphysical entities one should do away with. Hence, as a matter of method, one must stress the *non-autonomy of thought* from activity. The oft-quoted Marxist claim that "legal relations as well as the forms of state [...] have their roots in the material conditions of life"<sup>55</sup> extends to the origin of ideology as well. This does not imply that such material relations are *a priori* concrete and immediately accessible to the investigator. Such material conditions are only uncovered *after* engaging in dialectical investigation. To fail to conduct such an investigation leaves the putative material relations overly abstract and insufficiently determinate. Marx's methodological criticism of the classical political economy is relevant:

"It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [*Begriff*], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations."<sup>56</sup>

Moving from the concrete to the abstract uncovers the abstract relations which govern the (previously empty, formalistic) concreta, but these abstract relations in turn can only attain validity *on the basis of an investigation of definite material social relations*. Consequently:

"The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking,

---

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" from *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 100.

therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation *Anschauung* and conception.”<sup>57</sup>

Within the abstracta that one uncovers via this process is the seed of the social relations which give it its validity. For instance, “the simplest economic category, say e.g. exchange value, presupposes population, moreover a population producing in specific relations; as well as a certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc. It can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an already given, concrete, living whole.”<sup>58</sup>

One therefore returns to the concrete, but this time as a set of concrete relations which are the *result* of dialectical investigation and not dogmatically assumed. These concrete facts are *social* in nature, as the asocial conception of a human essence is one which treats sensuous activity as if it were mere contemplation.<sup>59</sup>

Another advantage of Marx’s dialectical method is that it not only avoids the problems of the overly abstract and indeterminate methodology of Mannheim, but also the overly specific and asocial methodology which ostensibly lies in contraposition to it. Bukharin notes that nearly every economic figure associated with the Marginal Revolution argues for the subjective theory of value using examples of isolated atomic individuals and then presuming that such examples scale up to a social level.<sup>60</sup> This Hobbesian model, on which the functioning of the whole is wholly reducible to the functioning of the constituent parts is unjustified because man is a *zoon politikon* and not Robinson Crusoe, and consequently a society is more than a mere aggregation of Robinson Crusoes. The economic effects of the inherent sociality of humanity are that the picture of society that positivists like the Marginal Economists depict is not only incorrect, but *precisely backward*, as Bukharin argues:

Society (as is consciously or unconsciously assumed) is not an arithmetical aggregate of isolated individuals; on the contrary, *the economic activity of each specific individual pre-supposes a definite social environment in which the social relation of the individual economies finds its expression* [emphasis mine]. The motives of the individual living in isolation are entirely different from those of the “social animal” (*zoon politikon*). The former lives in an environment consisting of nature, of things in their pristine simplicity;

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” from *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton & Co., Inc., 1978), 145, §VI.

<sup>60</sup> Nikolai Bukharin, *Economic Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: International Publisher, 1927), 42.

the latter is surrounded not only by "matter" but also by a peculiar social milieu. The transition from the isolated human to society is possible only by way of the social milieu. And indeed, if we were dealing only with an aggregate of individual economies, without any points of contact between them, [...] there would be no society. Of course, it is theoretically quite possible to embrace a number of isolated and remote economies in a single conception, to force them into a "totality" as it were. *But this totality or aggregate would not be a society* [emphasis mine], a system of economies closely connected with each other with constant interaction between them. While the former aggregate would be one we had artificially constructed, the second is one that is truly present. Therefore the individual economic subject may be regarded only as a member of a social economic system, not as an isolated atom.<sup>61</sup>

Individualistic models of social science à la Hobbes and Böhm-Bawerk therefore create a false totality that does injustice to *both* the particular and the general. But the excursus on the Marginal Revolution shows us a second problem with extant attempts to unite social sciences under the banner of philosophy: namely, that different social sciences embrace mutually exclusive philosophical assumptions and methodologies.<sup>62</sup> That the assumptions and methodologies are useful within a specific field does not take away from the fact that these assumptions seem impossible to reconcile into a totality. For example, while mainstream economics embraces an individualistic methodology that privileges the particular individual over social processes as a whole, the opposite problem occurs in some branches of sociology which rely on ideal types of groups of individuals that do not cleanly correspond to flesh and blood individuals.<sup>63</sup> For instance, one finds in Émile Durkheim's seminal work on suicide a methodology that proceeds *from* the general *to* the particular: a methodology totally repugnant to the individualistic methodology of economics. Differences in the types of suicides are fleshed out in terms of their causes, i.e., the "social conditions responsible for them."<sup>64</sup> Specific instances of suicide correspond with more or less fidelity *to* the ideal types, since the object of analysis is the "*social* suicide-rate [emphasis mine]."<sup>65</sup> Thus, contra the method of economics<sup>66</sup> "[t]he social rate must be taken directly as the object of analysis; progress must

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Horkheimer, "The Present Situation," 8.

<sup>63</sup> Recall that this is one problem with Mannheim's sociology of knowledge.

<sup>64</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 99.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> As well as the tendency toward isolated thought experiments in analytic philosophy, though such a method only blossomed well after the period of time under consideration in this essay.

be from the whole to the parts.”<sup>67</sup>

A methodology like that of Marx, one which searches for the material social relations which lie immanent in the abstracta of a given ideology, is necessary for a critical theory of ideology. By investigating the dialectic between ideology and material relations, we also solve the problem of the disconnect between ideology as such and its bearers in Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, that is, a gap between “the mundane struggles of everyday historical life, and *next to them also* the conflicts of the ‘systems of *Weltanschauungen*.’”<sup>68</sup> Without the dialectical critique of ideology in material social relations, the whole concept of situational determination becomes metaphysically strange and lacking in any explanatory power.

Moreover, while Mannheim’s attempt to give a value-free conception of ideology has a scientific veneer, his eschewing of the normative side of ideology requires a strict fact/value distinction which itself is unscientific. This division is a common problem to scientific inquiry of the time, especially of positivism. As Horkheimer notes in “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” scientific inquiry does not stand outside the “dynamisms of history,”<sup>69</sup> and thus the cleavage between “theory and action is itself a historical process.”<sup>70</sup> Scientific inquiry, including the Mannheimian sociology of knowledge, is in the grasp of two contradictions:

“First, science accepts as a principle that its every step has a critical basis, yet [...] the setting of tasks, lacks a theoretical grounding and seems to be taken arbitrarily. Second, science has to do with a knowledge of comprehensive relationships; yet, it has no realistic grasp of that comprehensive relationship upon which its own existence and the direction of its work depend, namely, society.”<sup>71</sup>

Underlying both these problems is the need for science to be directed by “the necessities of social life,”<sup>72</sup> viz., the necessities of *capitalist* social life, which takes as a presupposition the division of labor. Returning to Mannheim, we see that the insistence that the sociology of knowledge stands *above* specific total conceptions of ideology imbues it with a false totality insofar as it does not ground the predominance of these

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>68</sup> Horkheimer, “A New Concept of Ideology?,” 145.

<sup>69</sup> Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” in Critical Theory: Selected Essays, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 2002), 3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

ideologies in social relations. On this point, it is unsurprising that there is a degree of affinity between Mannheim and the Neo-Kantians of the Marburg School, both of whom insist that “everything about the object is reduced to conceptual determinations, [and hence] the end-result of such theoretical work is that nothing is to be regarded as material and stable.”<sup>73</sup> We have, then, a totality, but a false and empty one.

One material relation that undergirds this intellectual fragmentation is the division of labor in capitalist societies. Here, Lukacs’ work on reified consciousness presaged later critiques of scientific inquiry by the Frankfurt School. The mere fact that there are psychological implications of commodity fetishism is obvious. After all, it involves misperceiving the social relations of labor as “an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor”<sup>74</sup> while the objects *themselves* appear in the social relations of the value-form. The results of such a process is that objectivity and subjectivity get inverted; the world of commodities, as Lukacs notes, “confront [man] as invisible forces that generate their own power”<sup>75</sup> while *subjectively* “a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which [...] must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article.”<sup>76</sup> Pace concerns about conflating the Taylorist and Fordist mode of capitalist production of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with contemporary, putatively “post-Fordist” production, one may still identify the throughline of rationalization and specialization: viz., the breaking down of the productive process “into abstract, rational, [specialized] operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a [specialized] set of actions.”<sup>77</sup> This implies a second process: that of converting labor time “from a merely empirical average figure to an objectively calculable work-stint that confronts the worker as a fixed and established reality.”<sup>78</sup> The psychological consequence of this process is that even the worker’s “psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised [sic] rational systems and

<sup>73</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory” from *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 2002), 198.

<sup>74</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2013), 47.

<sup>75</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 87.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Also note that HCC was published *before* the publication of the 1844 Manuscripts!

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

their reduction to statistically viable concepts.”<sup>79</sup>

Why assume intellectual labor is any different? The mere fact that there *is* an intellectual division of labor is mundane, but leads to profound consequences. The intellectual division of labor leads to an isolation of specialized fields from one another, which in turn limit their utility and scholarly output. Buck-passing on matters of fact leads some disciplines (especially in the social sciences) to uncritically accept the object of their investigation, weakening the overall scientific value of the endeavor. But this uncritical acceptance *also* distorts the goals of scientific inquiry. For Horkheimer,

“A conception [of theory] is needed which overcomes the one-sidedness that necessarily arises when limited intellectual processes are detached from their matrix in the total activity of society. In the idea of theory which the scholar inevitably reaches when working purely within his own discipline, the relation between fact and conceptual ordering of fact offers a point of departure for such a corrective conception. The prevailing theory of knowledge has, of course, recognized the problem which this relation raises. The point is constantly stressed that identical objects provide for one discipline problems to be resolved only in some distant future, while in another discipline they are accepted as simple facts.”<sup>80</sup>

Hence, what makes something ideological is not *just* a question of the researcher uncritically accepting the object of analysis (thought that is *part* of the formulation). Rather, ideology *also* required that the aims of investigation also determined by entities other than the researchers themselves. The researcher is not a Kantian agent who can set their own hypothetical ends, but rather a part of a capitalist process who must subordinate these ends. This subordination may be *immediate*, in the case where one subordinates the ends of research to one’s boss or research and development board, or *mediately* via attempts to reify one’s consciousness (as occurs when one chases academic trends rather than pursue one’s self-selected goals). Both the input *and* the output of intellectual research are determined in scientific inquiry. Social totality determines *both* the object of analysis and the researcher as subject, both of which determine the aims. Social totality *needs* to be taken into account. I shall henceforth refer to the two ways in which social totality determines intellectual activity (that is, it both determines the object of analysis, which the researcher must uncritically accept, and the *telos* toward which the activity aims) as *double determination*.

One of two consequences follow from this intellectual division of

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 199.

labor. Either scholars must content themselves with the role that the division of labor provides for them, in which case many questions worth investigating are left unanswered,<sup>81</sup> or one must engage in blind speculation beyond the limits of one's discipline. Consequently, we see in both "Traditional and Critical Theory" as well as "Notes on Science and the Crisis" that the intellectual division of labor is the ultimately determining grounds for limitations in thought. To return to Mannheim, then, we see another error in the sociology of knowledge: viz., that it proceeds *from* the particular *to* the total conception of ideology. While, for Mannheim, the total conception of ideology flows *from* the development of the particular concept of ideology, Lukacs shows us that the individual *psychological* characteristics which constitute a particular conception of ideology are the *result of*, in the final analysis, the capitalist division of labor, while Horkheimer shows that this analysis *also* applies to reified academic pursuits. This leads, in turn, for social scientists to fall prey to double determination, and requires the imposition of strange metaphysical entities to do the explanatory work. We now have a basic methodological schematic for investigating ideology. What remains is to uncover *how* things are determined via ideology.

### 3.4. Functionalism

The *Ideologietheorie* of the Frankfurt School finds its most fleshed out form when investigating the self-conception of the so-called "early modern" thinkers who represented the nascent bourgeoisie contra decadent feudalism. This is because thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes were the first to broach the subject of ideology, that is, the question of "how the social situation relates to the prevailing ideas that come to be recognized as false."<sup>82</sup> Yet the approach that especially the latter undertook rendered such an investigation fruitless for two reasons, per Horkheimer. First, for liberal theorists, the term "ideology" merely refers to the inverse of Reason.<sup>83</sup> This juxtaposition is itself historical, as "the material and intellectual development of the preceding periods as a necessary prerequisite for the Enlightenment."<sup>84</sup> Were Enlightenment able to self-reflect on its own temporal ascendance, the rigidity of the distinction would vanish. This is a point that even the mature Horkheimer and Adorno

<sup>81</sup> See, *inter alia*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2014), 6.53, p. 107-8.

<sup>82</sup> Max Horkheimer, "Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History" in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 361.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

stress in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; viz., that despite Enlightenment's pretense of liberating humanity from the "self-incurred immaturity"<sup>85</sup> of myth, it was incapable of grasping that Enlightenment "entangles itself [...] in mythology."<sup>86</sup> Second, the methodological individualism of thinkers like Hobbes, who conceive of the state as explicable "in terms of the properties of its smallest constitutive parts, namely human beings,"<sup>87</sup> prevent the theory from having any explanatory power in the realm of social science. Here, Mannheim's situational determination *at least* has the advantage of having the *pretense* of sociality built into the model.

For Horkheimer, ideology is not merely an individual falsehood, but has a "specific function in social struggle."<sup>88</sup> It is therefore a *functionalist* concept rather than a mere metaphysical entity or moral-political judgment about the pathological nature of action or thought. While emphasizing the primacy of the social may lead to worries about how such social entities are grounded, unlike Mannheim, Horkheimer recognizes that the social nature of ideology is explicable in terms of the sensuous material activity that societies engage in:

The predominant ideas of an epoch have roots that go deeper than the ill intentions of certain individuals. Such ideas are endemic to a given social structure, whose outlines are given by the way in which individuals sustain themselves at the time. The basic process whereby primitive hunters or fishermen secure their existence dictates not only their material mode of life, but in a certain sense their intellectual horizon as well. Similarly, the form of life based upon this primitive level of development not only conditions the actual life of the individuals, but also has a significant influence on their knowledge of the external world, as well as on the content and structure of their general understanding of life. The same point applies to more differentiated forms of society: *the intellectual life of individuals is bound up with the life process of the social body of which they are a part and which determines their activity* [emphasis mine].<sup>89</sup>

Ideology, then, is *not* a precondition for agency or group formation, but rather the *result of a material social process*. However, it is a result which subsequently serves as a presupposition of the social process in a dialectical manner. To conflate ideology, i.e., a *result of the process of*

<sup>85</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in *Toward a Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 17, 8:35.

<sup>86</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>87</sup> Horkheimer, "Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History," 339.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 360.

social activity, with the activity itself, is to make a category error. There is a whiff of more traditional Marxism in this account:

it is impossible to understand the content or nature of people's intellectual makeup without knowledge of the epoch in which they live, or indeed (leaving the primitive peoples aside) without knowing the specific position they occupy in the social production process. The vital functions necessary to sustain and further human existence have not been combined within every single individual since the time of the primitive hunters and fisherman; rather, such functions are distributed amongst the various groups within society. But this also entails the differentiation of the whole of thought [*geistige Leben*], which develops internal contradictions.<sup>90</sup>

More orthodox strands of Marxism would mostly concur that one cannot understand one's intellectual makeup without understanding their position in class relations. However, this is a *weaker* claim than the Vulgar Marxist conception of *strict* reflection theory. This weakening of the Vulgar Marxist view allows Horkheimer's view to escape historical relativism, as "[t]he relativity of a proposition and ideology are two rather different sorts of things. The limits to what may be [sic] rightly be called ideology are constantly set by our current state of knowledge."<sup>91</sup> Ideological falsehood is not falsehood simpliciter, but a specific type of falsehood defined on the basis of function.

Given that the Frankfurt School thinks that ideology is the result of a social process, one might rightly ask *what* function gives rise to ideology. Here, the notion of ideology as *false* and *obfuscatory* comes to the fore. In "Notes on Science and the Crisis," Horkheimer sketches out the way in which earnest attempts to ascertain the truth may still count as ideological insofar as they obfuscate the true nature of society:

Not only metaphysics but the science it criticizes is ideological, in so far as the latter retains a form which hinders it in discovering the real causes of the crisis. To say it is ideological is not to say that its practitioners are not concerned with pure truth. Every human way of acting which hides the true nature of society, built as it is on contrarieties, is ideological, and the claim that philosophical, moral, and religious acts of faith, scientific theories, legal maxims, and cultural institutions have this function is not an attack on the character of those who originate them but only states the objective role such realities play in society. Views valid in themselves and theoretical and aesthetic works of undeniably high quality can in certain circumstances operate ideologically, while many illusions, on the contrary, are not a form of ideology. The occurrence of ideology in the members of a society necessarily depends on their place in economic life; only when relationships have so far developed and conflicts of interest

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 362.

have reached such an intensity that even the average eye can penetrate beyond appearances to what is really going on, does a conscious ideological apparatus in the full sense usually make its appearance. As an existing society is increasingly endangered by its internal tensions, the energies spent in maintaining an ideology grow greater and finally the weapons are readied for supporting it with violence.<sup>92</sup>

That ideology obfuscates the immanent contradictions in society does not entail that one may simply dispel ideological illusions via shining a light upon it. Contra later Critical Theorists who insist on ideal discursive conditions, ideology is not *merely* illusion, and hence no number of exhortations to the truth can suffice to remove it.<sup>93</sup>

Ideologies may function well in their role, but like other machines, can break down and cease to function. When ideologies break down, not all its adherents jump ship. Rather, when the ideological superstructure and its requisite institutions falter or no longer can no longer play their role in the reproduction of society, those who benefit from the prevailing social order remove the mask of liberal humanitarian reasoning to reveal the hideously fiendish face of brutality beneath it. Or, as Horkheimer notes in *Dawn and Decline*, “[t]he less stable necessary ideologies are, the more cruel the methods by which they are protected.”<sup>94</sup> The rise of fascism in the 30s, and the ever-growing threat of an eerily similar authoritarian capitalism today, show that the Enlightenment flickers as it falls prey to its own mythos, leaving behind only ash and soot, a testament to its spent potential. The revelation that the myth of Enlightenment was not an eternally valid truth, but a construction which displaced earlier myths, causes monopoly capital to put less weight on it and more weight on repression, just as someone who injures their right leg places more weight on their left.<sup>95</sup>

If ideology is functional, *where* is this functionalism? The answer is that it lies in human action and thought. To that end, the following section lays out the *obfuscatory* function that ideology plays in hiding the immanent contradictions of bourgeois society.

<sup>92</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis” from *Critical Theory*, 7-8.

<sup>93</sup> I’m thinking predominantly of Habermas here. For an evisceration of Habermas’ theory of communicative action, see Raymond Geuss, “A Republic of Discussion: Habermas at ninety,” *The Point*, 18 June 2019, <https://thepointmag.com/politics/a-republic-of-discussion-habermas-at-ninety/>

<sup>94</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Dawn” from *Dawn & Decline*, 17.

<sup>95</sup> Such a distinction presages Althusser’s distinction between the Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatuses by over a generation. See Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 15-22.

### 3.5. An Adjectival, Not a Nominal Account of Ideology

As we have seen, the concept of ideology is *not* an abstract metaphysical entity like a *Weltanschauung*, but a *functionalist process*. Rather than stipulate ideology as abstracta à la Mannheim, the Frankfurt School treats ideology as *adjectival*. That is, to paraphrase Herr Morain, for the Frankfurt School, ideology is false consciousness, with an emphasis on *false* and not on *consciousness*. That ideology is conceived of as falsehood is not unique to the Frankfurt School, obviously, but what separates the IfS is its recognition that there is a moment of truth in ideology and in all thought. This subsection traces the causal chain that gives rise to ideological distortions, starting from its most abstract components toward a more determinate answer based in the capitalist mode of production itself.

The aforementioned paragraph from “Notes on Science and the Crisis” shows that ideology is not bullshit in Harry Frankfurt’s sense: that is, speech which is unconcerned with the truth whatsoever.<sup>96</sup> This is a point at which Horkheimer and Mannheim are in agreement. Both think that ideology is neither actively deceitful nor unconcerned with the truth. This point is worth mentioning since careless theories of ideology often reduce the concept to either bullshit or deception. Rather, for Horkheimer, many well-intentioned intellectual programs become ideological because they unintentionally obscure the immanent contradictions within society. Intellectual programs of this type abound, many of which fall prey to double determination. Indeed, this is a recurrent problem with positivism of all stripes.

But why does science in the capitalist epoch tend toward ideological obfuscation? If ideology is neither bullshit nor malicious falsehood, then one may rule out the Vulgar allegedly-Marxist theory that it is merely a matter of bourgeois self-interest to deceive the masses. Theories that rely on conspiratorial deception are themselves non-Marxist, as they attribute agency to the putative Great Men of History instead of the masses engaged in antagonistic economic social relations. Rather, focusing on why this paragraph on ideology appears in “Notes on Science and the Crisis” is elucidatory. The rest of the essay contains a theme that returns in the opening chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the instrumentalization of reason. Speaking of scientific inquiry before 1914, Horkheimer notes that the Enlightenment program of bourgeois criticism against Scholasticism had fulfilled its task by the mid-19<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> See Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 47-62.

century.<sup>97</sup> The resultant endeavor was thus the description and classification of phenomena that did not concern itself with distinguishing the relevant from trivial. After overcoming Scholasticism, Enlightenment scientific inquiry ceased criticism, and therefore dogmatically assumed that its premises were eternal and unchanging. It thus went from being a liberating force to a conservative one, which maintains extant social relations. Consequently, the mechanistic view of science that predominated was more attuned to maintaining society as it was rather than advancing it. This led scientific inquiry to eschew questions about social progress, which in turn forced it to rely on “a set of unexplicated, rigid, and fetishistic concepts”<sup>98</sup> rather than attending to the real “need [...] to throw light on them by relating them to the dynamic movement of events.”<sup>99</sup>

The root of this failure is not science itself but the social conditions which relegate it to a bureaucratic role in the day-to-day management of capital instead of rational inquiry. Scientific inquiry is in the grasp of two contradictions, as Horkheimer explains:

First, science accepts as a principle that its every step has a critical basis, yet the most important step of all, the setting of tasks, lacks a theoretical grounding and seems to be taken arbitrarily. Second, science has to do with a knowledge of comprehensive relationships; yet, it has no realistic grasp of that comprehensive relationship upon which its own existence and the direction of its work depend, namely, society.<sup>100</sup>

These two contradictions are related, since both stem from a lack of investigating society. More critically, these contradictions arise *because* the economic order on which scientific inquiry depends is itself enmeshed in immanent contradictions. The reification of human activity encompasses not only the factory floor, but also the ivory tower. The division of intellectual labor has incentivized the renunciation of totality. Moreover, the *aims* of science are not its own, as science “is determined in the scope and direction of its work not by its own tendencies alone but [...] by the necessities of social life as well.”<sup>101</sup> That is, capital conducts science as part of its process, and the rise of what Adorno and Horkheimer call the “administered world” shows that monopoly capital’s intimate relationship with the state plays an important role. Since the state and capital play a predominant role in the scientific crisis,

---

<sup>97</sup> Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” 5.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

"that crisis is inseparable from the general crisis."<sup>102</sup> Scientific inquiry that is subject to the double determination is, by that fact, ideological. But this division of academic labor is one that must be imposed upon the scientist. The forces that impose limitations on scientific inquiry have their root not in the realm of thought but in capitalist social relations. Hence, to uncover the false element in ideology we must abandon the idyllic pretensions of intellectual clarity and descend into "the hidden abode of production."<sup>103</sup>

The growth of this thought is ideological insofar as it papers over the immanent contradictions within economic activity and the legal form. Yet this is not a function of malevolent actors suppressing the truth, but rather the result of Enlightenment's ambiguous relationship with capital. The Enlightenment's aim of liberating humanity from its superstitions may have extirpated existing myths, but in so doing it marshaled up myths of its own: those of rationalization, formalization, and regulation.<sup>104</sup> All that reason cannot subjugate underfoot must be committed to the flames; it is for this reason that "Enlightenment is totalitarian."<sup>105</sup> Alongside this standardization comes the principle of *equivalence*: bourgeois society "makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities."<sup>106</sup> But the very moment of rationality's domination over nature is empty. Rather than standing alongside it, man is subjected to the very Enlightenment myths which he conjured up. The unified schematic of earlier philosophical epochs proves less useful to capital than its fragmentation into sundry specialized sciences, all of which avoid the critical steps of justifying their tasks or relating them to an overall whole. In short, since the real subsumption of labor to capital is the true cause of the false and obscuring elements of ideology, one at last finds that one's thought is not autonomous.

If ideology is fundamentally false, then what is conversely true? Here, the concept of *totality* as the opposite of ideology is important to stress.

### 3.6. Ideology and Totality

The concept of ideology must be counterposed to that of totality. Since ideology both obfuscates immanent contradictions in a social totality and plays a role in class struggle, totality must strip away the illusory

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>103</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 119.

<sup>104</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

element of ideology. But how might one go about doing this? Here, two facets of the Frankfurt School tradition provide us with the tools to overcome the overgrowth of ideology that papers over the real foundation of capitalist social relations: that of *interdisciplinarity* in the critical theory of ideology and doing *justice to the particular*. Immediately upon his ascension to the directorship of the IfS, Horkheimer stressed the need for interdisciplinary investigation to address the crisis of scientific knowledge. In his inaugural address in this capacity, Horkheimer attempted to lay out the lacunae in extant attempts at uniting disparate phenomena under the label of totality.

Social philosophy, the discipline with which Horkheimer identified himself, requires viewing people not as autonomous, atomic individual subjects (as bourgeois philosophy since at least the time of Hobbes has done), but rather as “members of a community”<sup>107</sup> and consequently attempts to understand “phenomena that can only be understood in the context of human social life: [...] with the entire material and intellectual culture of humanity.”<sup>108</sup> Even though the withering of German Idealism spelled the dissolution of classical social philosophy, one must still look to Hegel to see how the cunning of spirit makes particular ends universal.<sup>109</sup> While the empirical researcher must delve into the slaughter-bench of history, Hegel thought philosophy raises us to the standpoint of the owl of Minerva, providing consolation and reconciling injustices with the development of reason. The transfiguration of reality which occurs in this practice also reconciles the particular to the universal, so that one cannot fully actualize oneself in the context of a state, though the state exists as an end in itself.<sup>110</sup> As the prestige of German Idealism decayed during the latter half of the 19th century, the metaphysics of objective spirit was replaced with a naive optimism in the pre-established harmony of individual interests and a Whig history. But this worldview proved empty, and individuals increasingly viewed the world as a medley of arbitrariness. The claim that individuals partake in the organic unity of the State, which, *qua* ethical community, is itself a part of the dialectic of history. When it went by the wayside, people saw brute facts as naked, requiring a theory to use. Even the neo-Kantians got in on the action in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries

---

<sup>107</sup> Horkheimer, “The Present Situation,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 1.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. Though of course, Hegel’s argument in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* is bourgeois in the sense that it relies on the Smithian division of labor as a universal constant rather than a development of the capitalist mode of production.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 5.

via their attempt to show that there existed some higher realm outside the scope of positivism.<sup>111</sup>

These social philosophies are right to articulate a supra-individual sphere, but also have shortcomings: they are still too positivistic and individualistic.<sup>112</sup> Their insistence on this methodology forces them to rely on metaphysical abstracta (e.g., the Hegelian *Volksgesist* or the various false assumptions that economists have always made) that render the theory unable to explain distinctively *social* phenomena. One further complication is that there are often mutually exclusive methodologies *within a given scientific domain*. As Marx notes, what separates classical political economy from its Physiocratic predecessors is in part a methodological difference: while the Physiocrats focused on a concrete example of labor (viz., agricultural labor), Smith's advance consists in throwing out "every limiting specification of wealth-creating activity"<sup>113</sup> to the abstract universality of labor as such. To repeat a theme from Section 3.3, *only* a dialectical approach of the kind that Marx outlines in the *Grundrisse* can overcome the antinomy between the overly reductive individualistic approach of early bourgeois philosophy and the overly abstract and indeterminate approach of Mannheim and Durkheim.

The crisis of the social sciences has its origin in the division of labor that makes the social sciences possible in the first place. In particular, the strict bifurcation of empirical social research and social philosophy renders both worse off than uniting the two via a dialectical continuum. The heart of this dialectical relation is one of interdisciplinarity: "the task is to [...] pursue [...] larger philosophical questions on the basis of the most precise scientific methods, to revise and refine their questions in the course of their substantive work, and to develop new methods without losing sight of the larger context."<sup>114</sup> Philosophy must give empirical work its animating impulses but also must be left open to be changed by its results. Thus, there is a need to gather disparate fields together in collaboration to pursue the questions in this dialectical fashion. Philosophical questions get integrated into scientific study; the results of such studies advance philosophical knowledge. Hence, this is a social process: a fitting one, given the social nature of the object of analysis.

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 6. One may cite Hermann Cohen in the sphere of philosophy, Hans Kelsen in the legal sphere, and Mannheim in the sociological field as exemplars of this neo-Kantian approach.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>113</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 104.

<sup>114</sup> Horkheimer, "The Present Situation," 9-10.

There is one remaining problem. Recall that Mannheim's account of ideology is lacking because it is so broad that it does not do justice to the particular, as it involves placing competing worldviews in a titanic struggle over and above the political struggles that flesh and blood people undertake. Despite our best efforts, one may worry that the comprehensive critical theory of ideology sketched out here is still inadequate in this respect. The idea of totality is counterposed to ideology: totality is truth and ideology is false. Hence, we need some concept of totality to explain *why* ideology is false consciousness. This task has become more pressing given the increasing broadsides against the concept of totality in the decades since the decline of the original generation of the Frankfurt School.<sup>115</sup> Though the influence of postmodernism on the academy has waned, the initial suspicion of a unity which crushes underfoot the possibility of the creation of new game rules remains.

Of course, critiques of totality are not new. These criticisms have been, historically, the domain of the Right and levied against *liberal* insistence on the sovereignty of reason.<sup>116</sup> But if we allow ourselves to dispense of the concept of totality, the critical theory of ideology becomes pallid and intellectually barren, as there is no universal metric by which one may measure the content of ideologies, as the world becomes a "medley of arbitrariness."<sup>117</sup> If this is the case, then there is no reason to prefer a critical theory of ideology over a Mannheimian sociology of knowledge, as both will be founded upon unstable metaphysical foundations. Without the ability to unify social scientific inquiry under one banner, we risk falling prey to those objections which state that there is simply too much knowledge for any intellectual enterprise to account for.<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, to dogmatically assume the objective possibility of totality is to commit a grave philosophical sin, as it presumes the very conclusion it aims to establish.<sup>119</sup> One must subject one's own intellectual tools to criticism before using them.

---

<sup>115</sup> See, e.g., Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>116</sup> See, *inter alia*, Joseph de Maistre, "On Divine Influence in Political Constitutions" from *Considerations on France*, ed. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 49-53.

<sup>117</sup> Horkheimer, "The Present Situation," 3.

<sup>118</sup> See, e.g., F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (Sep. 1945): 519-530.

<sup>119</sup> Indeed, this is why introductions in philosophy are unphilosophical, as philosophy should progressively unfold the immanent intellectual content that lies latent inside the object of inquiry. Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Terry Pinkard and Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

The solution to this problem first appears in the Young Marx's writings, which stress that criticism which contented itself with criticism of ideas was insufficient as it did not apply this analysis to *concreta*. This does not imply that we know material relations *a priori*, as Marx's hitherto mentioned analysis of the method of political economy shows. To give putatively concrete entities more determinate content requires us to put *concreta* in the context of *social* relations, thereby giving material conditions a totality. It is for *this* reason that Marx considered all previous versions of materialism deficient; by foregoing the social and practical elements of material relations, one treats materialism as a mere object of contemplation.<sup>120</sup>

It is for this reason that the IfS' insistence on both a theoretical and empirical element to their research as well as a collaborative work ethic allowed it to prosper, if only for a moment. The image of the bourgeois intellectual, isolated and productive, is one which is ill-suited to the task of remedying the faults with scholarly inquiry today. Its reified nature suits those with niche interests, but the academy's self-perception as an outdated relic has some merit today. The ceaseless exhortation for academics to justify themselves belies an insecurity that they can no longer serve either capital or knowledge. In attempting to serve both masters, the modern academy has served neither.

By contrast, Horkheimer saw fit to stress that totality is the way *out* of the intellectual crisis of our age. The crisis *arose* in the first place because disparate fields assume contradictory but useful assumptions which seem impossible to reconcile into a totality.<sup>121</sup> But not every grouping of intellectuals is up to the task. Indeed, the common criticism that the IfS set too lofty a goal for any group of intellectuals to accomplish would be a valid criticism if the aim of the group were merely to interpret the world. While this may make good material for academic self-aggrandizement, it is no way to change the world. The Institute failed not because its goal was unrealistic but precisely because the institute did not embrace its interdisciplinary and partisan nature *enough*. Interdisciplinarity can only grasp the totality once it entails not only a shared research program between intellectuals of different stripes, but *also* a shared commitment to some form of praxis. Contra later generations of critical theorists, critical theory must not be an exercise in retreating into abstraction to satiate Rawlsian hunger, as it then becomes meaningless abstracta. Rather it must be a theoretical tool which can be placed in the only

---

<sup>120</sup> See Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" from *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 143.

<sup>121</sup> Horkheimer, "The Present Situation," 7.

group which can overcome the total reification of all life both inside and outside the academy: the international proletariat.

At this point, the reader may wish for a concrete example of what a critical theory of ideology *looks* like, and how it is connected to the concept of totality. Luckily, Horkheimer provides us with one when analyzing the bourgeois revolutionary in his sprawling essay “Egoism and Freedom Movements.”

### 3.7. Theory and Critique of the Bourgeois Revolutionary

To fully appreciate the interwoven nature of the Frankfurtian *Ideologiekritik* and *Ideologietheorie* we must recognize that the predominant object of analysis that Horkheimer examined during the 1930s was bourgeois philosophy. Being a good historical materialist, he traces its development during the ascent of the Third Estate from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in “Egoism and Freedom Movements.” In said essay, Horkheimer’s *theory* that philosophy in the Early Modern period responds to and develops out of the rising power of the (as of yet still subordinated) bourgeoisie is intertwined with a *critique* of said philosophy as obfuscatory. This obfuscation arises not due to malevolence, but is an inversion of the *real* premises on which capitalism operates.

At first glance, one may think that the substantive disagreements between thinkers in this period prevents a systematic analysis of philosophical thought therein. Every student of political philosophy knows that writers never tire of contrasting Hobbes the pessimist with Rousseau the optimist, of those whose view of human nature as selfish and reprobate drives them to conservatism with those whose view of human nature as virtuous and uncorrupted drives them to liberalism or anarchism.<sup>122</sup> Even before Hobbes’ time, Horkheimer sees Machiavelli and More as *dramatis personae* with the roles of realist and pedagogical optimist respectively.<sup>123</sup> Both camps have their respective thinkers. Even Machiavelli finds a rival in his native Italy with Tommaso Campanella’s *Civitas Solis*, which emphasizes the capacity for a utopian society where reason reigns and discards all envy, property, and cause for discord.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>122</sup> See, e.g., the final chapter of Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). While Schmitt’s contrast is with counterrevolutionary thinkers like de Maistre and anarchists like Bakunin, and not with liberal thinkers like Hobbes and Rousseau, it is a useful read insofar as it plays on the same distinction.

<sup>123</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Egoism and Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era” from *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 49.

<sup>124</sup> Tommaso Campanella, *La città del sole* (Milano: Adelphi eBooks, 2023). <https://archive.org/details/lacittadelsole0117camp>

Yet despite this apparent antinomy, there are points of unification between the two camps. The first is a rejection of the Aristotelian conception of value that governed previous forms of political thought in the West in favor of a view of human nature that appealed to "historical, political, and psychological analysis."<sup>125</sup> In so doing, both camps attempt to maintain a pretense of neutrality: a pretense that does not bear much fruit. As a type of science, political theory in this period needed an object of analysis: in this instance the isolated individual. This "unquestioned individualistic principle that regulated the relationships of owners to one another, [and] also [...] the mental and instinctive barriers caused by the combination of this principle with the [...] increasing differentiation of social classes"<sup>126</sup> rendered theory in this period uncritical and dogmatic. By reducing political questions to mere questions of how Robinson Crusoes would interact, political philosophy of this type becomes ideological insofar as it papered over the differences internal to social life by reducing members of the society to interchangeable abstracta. While a Mannheimian ascription of ideal types to the two camps seems promising, one of the key differences between the Machiavellians and Moreans is one of power: those who emphasize "the aggressive [...] drives of human beings indicated an interest in oppression, whereas the emphasis placed on educability [...] was an expression of emancipatory tendencies."<sup>127</sup>

One further commonality between the camps is the condemnation of egoism and pleasure. Examples of this abound: from not only Machiavelli's repeated insistence that a corrupt city can only stay free with great difficulty,<sup>128</sup> but also Luther's insistence that man's free will can lead him away from God,<sup>129</sup> the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, to the laws of Campanella's City of the Sun, which treat women's makeup and heels as capital offenses.<sup>130</sup> This distrust of egoistic behavior continues up through the victory of the Third Estate; Robespierre contrasts personal egoism to egoism which melds personal regard for love of

<sup>125</sup> Horkheimer, "Egoism and Freedom Movements," 50.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>128</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (Milano: BUR Rizzoli, 2018), LXVII-LXVIII, p. 108-111.

<sup>129</sup> See Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. Henry Cole (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1976), 122-7.

<sup>130</sup> Campanella, *La città del sole*, 32. «Però è pena della vita imbellettarsi la faccia, o portar pianelle, o vesti con le code per coprir i piedi di legno; ma non averiano commodità manco di far questo, perché chi ci li daria?»

the nation.<sup>131</sup> This undergirds his personal disgust toward corruption, which reaches its extreme during the trial of Danton.

Yet at the same time as this development of bourgeois morality, bourgeois political economy also develops. The pre-capitalist prohibition on usury<sup>132</sup> collapses from Calvin's criticism,<sup>133</sup> and the rise of merchant capital gave the urban bourgeoisie an economic and political power that it had not yet seen. At first glance, it seems strange that a moral aversion to egoism develops at the same time as a general slackening of economic regulations that bound the bourgeoisie. After all, the economic aims of the individual members of the bourgeoisie are selfish at heart. What Horkheimer saw, however, is that it is *precisely* the rise of capitalism that gave rise to this ethical doctrine. The unleashing of capitalistic economic relations required restraints to keep it from running amok: this was a point that most of its advocates ceded.<sup>134</sup> While purely juridical and traditional restraints may have sufficed in the odd exception (e.g., Horkheimer cites 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, and perhaps one may add the U.S. of the same period), in most instances the state was necessary to guide capital. But morality qua social force (one should keep in mind that "ethics" and "morality" ultimately stem etymologically from words meaning "custom") also helped restrain the beast. Hence, Horkheimer is correct to note that "the moralistic view of man contains a rational principle, albeit in mystified, idealistic form."<sup>135</sup> If, as Marx and Engels note, "[t]he religious world is but the reflex of the real world,"<sup>136</sup> then one must add that it does not always mirror the real world, but in this instance inverts its form of appearance. The role of anti-egoistic morality in capitalist society, then, is *both* one side of an antinomy immanent to the social totality, *and* a belief system which obfuscates the *real* terms on which social reproduction occurs.

That such a doctrine became popular as the bourgeoisie gained its footing *expresses* bourgeois social power; were there no ascendent capi-

<sup>131</sup> Horkheimer, "Egoism and Freedom Movements," 53-4.

<sup>132</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, "Question 78. Usury" from *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 38 (Westminster: Blackfriars, 1975), 233-254.

<sup>133</sup> I do not wish to overstate this point. Despite a *de jure* prohibition on usury, money lending did occur in Catholicism (e.g., the Church borrowing from the Fuggers). Additionally, Calvin is not as laissez-faire about money lending as is commonly assumed: he merely wishes to allow for money lending in *some* cases. This view is therefore less radical as it may seem, especially given the historical context. See David H. Eaton, "The Economists of the Reformation: An Overview of Reformation Teaching Concerning Work, Wealth, and Interest," *Sage Open* 3, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013494864>.

<sup>134</sup> Horkheimer, "Egoism and Freedom Movements," 54.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 53.

talist relations, there would be no need to hammer home the critique of egoism ad nauseam. The proof of this is the inconsistency with which the espousers of this moral schema apply it to different social groups. While many of these moralists inveigh against luxury, many are reluctant to fully trust the poor. This is most prominent with Luther, whose thunderous polemic against the Peasants' Revolt reaches almost comical proportions.<sup>137</sup> Even Robespierre, radical though he was, is far from cordial toward the Énragés.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, this distrust expresses itself as a tolerance for egotistical striving for power—in *some* social classes. Luther's supplication of the nobility, Machiavelli's appraisal of Cesare Borgia, and the Jeffersonian aggrandizement of the yeoman farmer all share the willingness to overlook "the striving of the mighty for power, prosperity within sight of misery, [and] the maintenance of anachronistic and unjust forms of society."<sup>139</sup>

This antinomy between the economic demand for competition, and therefore self-interest, on one hand, and the moral demand to eschew self-interested behavior has psychological effects on the bourgeois subject. The moral demand requires that one forgo lower pleasures for the sake of higher ones, and one is supposed to take pleasure in putatively uniquely *human* virtues.<sup>140</sup> This requires that one also make peace with the world as it is: "[n]othing makes a person more suspect than the lack of an inner harmony with life as it happens to be."<sup>141</sup> All that is seen as frivolous is degraded as bestial. At the same time, the very frugality which this morality promotes is used as a means toward capital accumulation. This antinomy only becomes more outwardly expressed as capital claws its way to a position of economic dominance. For instance, Adam Smith's valorization of thrift as the route to primitive accumulation attempts to merge the ethical and economic drives.<sup>142</sup> Yet despite all the thrift and ambition of the poor man's son, he finds in his old age that all his wealth was mere vanity.<sup>143</sup>

This brief overview of the schematic of bourgeois revolutionary thought shows that Horkheimer's account of ideology is at once both

<sup>137</sup> Martin Luther, "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants" from *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 45-57.

<sup>138</sup> Horkheimer, "Egoism and Freedom Movements," 103.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>142</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (Petersfield: Harriman House, 2007), 214-6.

<sup>143</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 211-2.

a detailed theory (which places thought in the context of the social conditions which give rise to it) *and a critique* of ideology (insofar as the moral system is obfuscating an immanent contradiction in bourgeois society).

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Loose Threads and Further Avenues for Research

There are a few loose threads that provide opportunities for further research beyond the scope of this essay. One may object that in the course of the investigation into ideology, I have remained too abstract insofar as I insufficiently investigated the material basis on which the ideological superstructure arises. In plain terms, one may argue that the critical theory of ideology is a project which aims at describing and unmasking the elements of the superstructure, but is insufficiently attentive to the matters of the economic base. One avenue for further research, then, is the application of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of ideology to the economic relations that form the real basis of society.

Of course, when talking about the real foundations of society, one must give a good account of how the real foundation of economic relations gives rise to the superstructure. One would find oneself in good company if one were to look to legal relations as a sort of bridge between the two, insofar as legal relations not only specify the conditions under which economic relations may be carried out, but also tie these relations to other spheres of life. Here, one should note that already by the time that Horkheimer ascended to his position as head of the IfS, Marxists of various backgrounds had criticized positivism for its uncritical approach to science. Evgeny Pashukanis rightly noted that legal positivism commits this sin when treating the legal form and its corresponding categories as eternal, unchanging essences instead of ideological categories that spring forth from the development of capitalism.<sup>144</sup> The legal form requires definite antinomies (e.g., the competing interests of different claimants) to function, as were there a unity of purpose among differing elements of a group, there would be no recourse to legal arbitration. Law, Pashukanis notes, mirrors the development of generalized commodity exchange, insofar as both are expedients "resorted to by isolated social elements in their intercourse with one another."<sup>145</sup> While Pashukanis is

---

<sup>144</sup> Evgeny B. Pashukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 73-85.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 134.

not optimistic about the ability to do away with this expedient entirely at present, the extent to which arbitration is resolved via the judiciary is historically contingent; previous modes of production relied more heavily on other means of social regulation (e.g., religious doctrine, ad hoc vigilantism). Further investigation into the legal form and its mediating role between base and superstructure, however, is a task for another day. The IfS were not primarily a group of attorneys, and hence a detailed analysis of how the legal form itself functions on ideological presuppositions (e.g., the antagonistic model of trial) is beyond the scope of the project.

A good Marxist would rightly note that not just the legal form, but also the political economy on which it is based, has an ideological character thanks to its inability to criticize the premises which serve as foundational in its science. The net result is that said sciences lapse back into dogmatism and paper over the real fissures within bourgeois society with a false unity. Classical political economy, with its Smithian insistence in a transhistorical “certain propensity in human nature [...] to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another”<sup>146</sup> leads its adherents down a primrose path to an explanatory dead end when accounting for the origins of capitalism. The Smithian explanation of the origins of capital accumulation are quite individualistic.<sup>147</sup> For Smith, capital accumulates gradually in those who are frugal, while it fails to accumulate in spendthrifts.<sup>148</sup> Even the poor worker may, if frugal enough, eventually may “maintain a menial servant”<sup>149</sup> [though who would the frugal menial servant employ?] or he may waste it on vice. Even the putative extravagance of the rich man is explained as extravagance in maintaining his opulent servants<sup>150</sup> [but would a truly frugal man not cut costs by doing their work himself?] rather than prodigality on behalf of the rich man. In so doing it reduces differences between rich and poor nations to a matter of a difference in *Volksgeister* and differences between classes as a predominantly *temperamental* difference rather than a difference in the means by which one labors. Of course, this is inverted: temperaments are not the cause of class differences, class differences incentivize differences in temperaments.

Of course, any economist who would sully himself by deigning to

<sup>146</sup> Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 9

<sup>147</sup> Though not *entirely* individualistic, as Smith notes that landlords, for instance, have structural incentives to not engage in capitalistic economic relations.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 216.

read this essay (and therefore reading outside his own hallowed field) would rightly protest that Smith is outdated and that not all economics uses abductive reasoning of this type. Indeed, given the more quantitative nature of economics today and the indebtedness the field owes to the Marginal Revolution, Smith's work is not even the same *type* of academic endeavor as that of the modern economists. Fair enough. But this does not mean that economists escape the problem of double determination. The model of *homo economicus* as a rational, self-interested agent underlies most microeconomic theories, but is itself an assumed fiction of dubious validity. Already by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, bourgeois economists had criticized the view. Thorstein Veblen's famous dismissal of the (now heterodox) Austrian School points out that not only is the view of human nature used oversimplified, but so removed from common sense views of human agency as to be useless:

"The hedonistic conception of man is that of a lightning calculator of pleasures and pains, who oscillates like a homogeneous globule of desire of happiness under the impulse of stimuli that shift him about the area, but leave him intact. He has neither antecedent nor consequent. He is an isolated, definitive human datum, in stable equilibrium except for the buffets of the impinging forces that displace him in one direction or another. Self-poised in elemental space, he spins symmetrically about his own spiritual axis until the parallelogram of forces bears down upon him, whereupon he follows the line of the resultant. When the force of the impact is spent, he comes to rest, a self-contained globule of desire as before. Spiritually, the hedonistic man is not a prime mover. He is not the seat of a process of living, except in the sense that he is subject to a series of permutations enforced upon him by circumstances external and alien to him."<sup>151</sup>

Stylistic prose aside, Veblen's essay is instructive as it is an example of how economic models lose their explanatory power when one dares criticize its undergirding assumptions. Not only the concept of *homo economicus* but the desire-satisfaction or hedonistic theories of the good that much of microeconomics assumes is philosophically suspect. The former falls prey to an obvious Euthyphro problem while the latter fell out of favor after criticism from Robert Nozick,<sup>152</sup> hardly a bastion of the left!

Despite its dubious philosophical origins, economic concepts reign supreme in areas even beyond its intended use. The rise of Law and Economics as an academic field stands out as one such area thanks

---

<sup>151</sup> Thorstein Veblen, "Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 12, no. 4 (1898): 373-97, 389-90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882952>.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York, Basic Books, 1974), 43-5.

to its increasingly predominant role in legal reasoning over the past several decades. The work of Richard Posner often involves porting over economic concepts to the law, and in so doing, porting over the uncritical abstractions of the field into real social relations. While a substantive critique of modern economic thought would be a fruitful endeavor, one should keep in mind that the neoclassical turn occurred decades after the collapse of the IfS, and hence a dialectical criticism of the movement is beyond the scope of the paper.

#### 4.2. Concluding Remarks

I conclude by remarking on the theoretical virtues of the Frankfurtian account of ideology. Too often in contemporary theories of ideology, one sees that the author has forsaken a definite methodology, instead treating the concepts *ad hoc*. This consequently weakens the *Ideologietheorie* as the theory has no determining grounds on which it can stand. Of course, this in turn prevents the *critical* aspect of ideology critique from reaching its full force, as there is no method by which one can adjudicate the falsity of the object of investigation.

On these matters, the Frankfurt School's conception of ideology stands as a shining beacon which rises above the detritus of the tomes published after it. The IfS' insistence on not accepting the given without subjecting it to critique, on the inability of bourgeois thought to adequately self-criticize, and by reiterating time and again that "it is not enough merely to correlate [...] ideas with some social group [...] [w]e must penetrate deeper and develop them out of the decisive historical process from which the social groups themselves are to be explained,"<sup>153</sup> the Frankfurt School stands head and shoulders above the unsystematic buffoons who came after them.

### Bibliography

- ALTHUSSER, LOUIS. *On Ideology*. London: Verso, 2020.
- AQUINAS, ST. THOMAS. *Summa Theologiae*, volume 38. Westminster: Blackfriars, 1975.
- AYER, A. J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. London: Penguin Books, 1971.
- BUKHARIN, NIKOLAI. *Economic Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: International Publishers, 1927.

---

<sup>153</sup> Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy" from *Critical Theory*, 263.

CAMPANELLA, TOMMASO. *La città del sole*. Milano: Adelphi eBooks, 2023.

DRAPER, HAL. "The Myth of Lenin's 'Concept Of The Party': Or What They Did to What Is To Be Done?" *Historical Materialism* 4 (1999)(1): 187–214. doi:10.1163/156920699100414373.

DURKHEIM, EMILE. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2002.

EATON, DAVID H. "The Economists of the Reformation: An Overview of Reformation Teaching Concerning Work, Wealth, and Interest". *Sage Open* 3 (2013)(3). doi:10.1177/2158244013494864.

FRANKFURT, HARRY G. *On Bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

GEUSS, RAYMOND. *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

———. "A Republic of Discussion: Habermas at ninety". *The Point* (2019). URL <https://thepointmag.com/politics/a-republic-of-discussion-habermas-at-ninety/>.

HAYEK, F. A. "The Use of Knowledge in Society". *The American Economic Review* 35 (1945)(4): 519–530. URL <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1809376>.

HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Terry P. Pinkard and Michael Baur. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

HORKHEIMER, MAX. *Dawn & decline: notes 1926 - 1931 and 1950 - 1969*. Translated by Michael Shaw. New York: Seabury Press, 1978.

———. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum Pub. Corp, 1982.

———. *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*. Translated by G. Frederick Hunter and John Torpey. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993.

HORKHEIMER, MAX AND THEODOR W. ADORNO. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

- KANT, IMMANUEL. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- . *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
- LENIN, V. I. *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*. New York: International Publishers, 1963.
- LUKÁCS, GYÖRGY. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.
- LUTHER, MARTIN. *Luther's Works*, volume 46. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967.
- . *The Bondage of the Will*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983. OCLC: 609564628.
- LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS. *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- MACHIAVELLI, NICCOLÒ. *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*. Number L 475 in Biblioteca universale Rizzoli I classici della BUR, 3rd edition, Milano: Biblioteca universale Rizzoli, 1996.
- MACKIE, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin Books, 1977.
- MAISTRE, JOSEPH MARIE. *Considerations on France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139170758.
- MANNHEIM, KARL. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- MARX, KARL. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978.
- . *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin books, 1993.
- . *Capital: Volume One*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2013.
- NOZICK, ROBERT. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.
- PASHUKANIS, EVGENY BRONISLAVOVICH. *The General Theory of Law & Marxism*. Law & Society series, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publ, 2007.

RSDLP(b). "Resolution on Party Unity", 1921. URL <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/party-congress/10th/16.htm>.

SCHMITT, CARL. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. University of chicago press ed edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

SMITH, ADAM. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

———. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*. Petersfield: Harriman House, 2007.

VEBLEN, THORSTEIN. "Why is Economics not an Evolutionary Science?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 12 (1898)(4): 373. doi:10.2307/1882952.

WITTGENSTEIN, LUDWIG. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by Charles K. Ogden. New York: Dover, 1999.

# Analytic Social Psychology as Critical Social Theory: A Reconstruction of Erich Fromm’s Early Work

J. E. Morain

## 1. Introduction

Despite the wide neglect that Erich Fromm enjoys in the reception of Frankfurt School critical theory, his early work was a crucial component in the project of interdisciplinary materialism that the Institute for Social Research pursued under Horkheimer’s direction throughout the 1930s. His dialectical synthesis of Marxist historical materialism and psychoanalysis is inseparable from the collective research of the Institute in general and the work of Horkheimer in particular. In this essay I want to reconstruct Fromm’s early work and thereby show that it stands alongside the work of the doyens of the Frankfurt School in terms of both analytical poignancy and critical depth.

The mode of presentation of this essay roughly traces a progression from the abstract to the concrete—that is, I have tried to organize it such that, after the introduction, the content of each section both presupposes and mediates/concretizes that of the preceding section(s). Therefore I begin, in Section 2 with a relatively abstract and general review of Fromm’s project and its place in the architectonic of critical theory, arguing that Fromm’s project was to theorize materialist mediations in both Marxist and psychoanalytic forms for interdisciplinary critical social theory. Following this, in Section 3 I describe three central concepts for this project of mediation—namely ‘cement,’ *the psychic structure of society*, and *ideology*—and how they figure into the overall structure of critical theory chez Fromm. This conceptual work then leads, in Section 4, into an account of the family as an institution which psychologically forms individuals into functional capitalist subjects. Section 5 finally comes to the upshot of the unstable nature of the mediations previously described and outlines three different crisis-tendencies that result from them. In my concluding remarks, I reflect on some limitations of Fromm’s theory.

A little bit of biography and literature review is in order before I get to the main body of my argument. Fromm was treated rather unjustly

by the other members of the Frankfurt School. Adorno never liked him; Horkheimer made Fromm his muse for a few years then promptly discarded him; Marcuse handled his theoretical disagreement with Fromm with unnecessary belligerence. The received image of the history of the Frankfurt School has been decisively influenced by the rather negative evaluations of Fromm made by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. This negative attitude towards Fromm was maintained even through the rise of Habermasian Critical Theory, transforming from a critique of Fromm's supposed revisionism and sociologism in Adorno and Marcuse into a critique of his alleged one-dimensional functionalism in Dahmer and Honneth, although Honneth has positive things to say about *Escape from Freedom*. Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973)—the only comprehensive history of the Frankfurt School written while most of its 'inner circle' was still alive and available for comment—gives Fromm his due, but in a backhanded way which makes Jay's sympathy for the real protagonists of his story, namely Adorno and Horkheimer, very clear. Wolfgang Bonß wrote a number of important and enlightening texts on Fromm as a member of the Institute for Social Research in the late 70s and early 80s, but the picture of 'interdisciplinary materialism' reconstructed in these texts is somewhat narrowly Horkheimerian, and the reconstruction effort itself is constrained by a methodologically induced modesty. That is to say, these essays are confined mainly to the interpretation and extrapolation of the programmatic texts of the Institute and do not sufficiently interrogate the relation between the declared programs, the published texts supposedly fulfilling said programs, and the research practice of the Institute in general; such a narrow focus on the programmatic texts is unfortunately common to most engagements with early Critical Theory.<sup>1</sup> After Bonß's relatively positive appraisal, Honneth brought up Fromm in *The Critique of Power* (1985) only to immediately dismiss him as a vulgar functionalist, a charge which shall be strongly challenged further down in this paper.<sup>2</sup> Wiggershaus's *The Frankfurt School* (1995) gives some more attention to Fromm and (thankfully) notes the unkindness with which he was treated by the likes of Adorno,

<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Bonß's commitment to a Habermasian paradigm in social science, while undoubtedly contributing to the clarity and insight of his analysis on many points, created theoretical blindspots and prejudices with regard to other points, notably the question of functionalism. As for texts, I mainly have in mind his introduction to Fromm's *The Working Class in Weimar Germany* (1984), his contributions to the anthology volume *Sozialforschung als Kritik* (1982), and his article "Kritische Theorie als empirische Wissenschaft: Zur Methodologie 'postkonventioneller' Sozialforschung" (1983).

<sup>2</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (MIT Press, 1993), 23-4.

Horkheimer, and Pollock, but the rather zoomed-out perspective of this book prevents any in-depth engagement with Fromm as a theoretician. Moving forward another two decades, John Abromeit's *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (2011) is probably the most just treatment of Fromm's contributions to the Frankfurt School thus far, but it is (understandably) limited in its analysis by the focus on Horkheimer, with Fromm entering the picture mainly as a junior partner to Horkheimer. Lawrence Friedman's biography *The Lives of Erich Fromm*, unfortunately, often misses the mark when it comes to rigorous intellectual biography: the author at one point describes critical theory as an enterprise building on "Hegel's dialectic materialism."<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the most comprehensive body of secondary literature on Fromm has come from the pen of his secretary-cum-executor Rainer Funk; his book *Life Itself Is an Art: The Life and Work of Erich Fromm* (2019) is, despite its short length, perhaps the best single overview of Fromm's lifework as a whole. Kieran Durkin's *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* (2014) is also a strong contender for that title, however.<sup>4</sup> Use of Fromm's archive in writing on him has been sporadic; when the archive has been consulted, this has typically been done for basically biographical purposes. While the release of some previously unpublished texts such as "Die männliche Schöpfung" (1933), *The Working Class in Weimar Germany* (1937/8), and "A Contribution to the Method and Purpose of an Analytical Psychology" (1937) has shed some light on Fromm's trajectory in this period, a number of other interesting documents have never been analyzed. In my research for this essay I found several documents in the Fromm papers at the New York Public Library that have deepened my understanding of his early work and the nature of his collaboration at the Institut für Sozialforschung. I use a number of these documents in the reconstruction that follows; the translations of these documents are all my own, and I provide the original German text in accompanying footnotes.<sup>5</sup>

This essay is reconstructive-reparative in aim, hence neither strictly

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Other authors who deserve recognition for their excellent work on Fromm include Joan Braune, Daniel Burston, Neil McLaughlin, Roger Frie, Michael Thompson, and Fromm's former research partner and co-author Michael Maccoby.

<sup>5</sup> There are even a few unpublished texts and notes by Horkheimer in the NYPL Fromm papers. Due to the constraints inherent to being an independent scholar I was only able to spend about a day's worth of work going through the Fromm papers and selecting documents to scan for further close reading; undoubtedly there were some fruitful documents which I did not discover.

doxographical nor critical. I have kept my critical comments and textual wrangling to the notes for the most part. The scope of the essay is confined to a relatively narrow period in Fromm's work ranging about a decade, roughly from the article "Psychoanalysis and Sociology" (1929) to the book *Escape from Freedom* (1941). Everything written in this period was produced under the sign of the Institute for Social Research, at which Fromm was chair of social psychology from 1931 to 1939. The working environment at the Institute was intensely collaborative, and all the main members of the Institute reviewed one another's manuscripts and theories extensively before they were finally published. According to Helmut Dubiel, "no single article appeared [in the Institute's journal] without having been ratified by the entire [inner] Circle [of the Institute, i.e. Horkheimer, Pollock, Löwenthal, Fromm, Marcuse, and Adorno]."<sup>6</sup> Fromm and Horkheimer in particular enjoyed an especially close working relationship for several years in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> This being the case, I have decided that it is justified at points to interpret and cite Horkheimer's work almost as if it had been written by Fromm, or rather as if both Horkheimer and Fromm were both merely mouthpieces of the collective authorship of the entire Institute. Further grounds for my reconstructive approach are to be found in the well-documented practice of self-censorship among the members of the IfS. This practice was even somewhat expanded in Fromm's case to include partial censorship of criticism directed at Freud, as such criticism both jeopardized his standing in the International Psychoanalytic Association (he was eventually excluded from the IPA in the early 1950s) and was perceived by other members of the IfS as a politically inappropriate attack on a fellow threatened intellectual. What is the nature of the reconstruction I propose? The task is to chart a course which avoids reducing Fromm to either his early religious and traditional-sociological writings or his later existentialism-influenced work. To this end, I have chosen to read

---

<sup>6</sup> Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. Benjamin Gragg (MIT Press, 1985), 176

<sup>7</sup> Gunzelin Schmid Noerr divides Fromm's history with the IfS into three phases, "(1) die Phase der integralen Mitarbeit Fromms im Institut in Frankfurt, Genf und New York von 1929 bis 1935, (2) die seiner Mitarbeiterschaft unter zunehmender Entfremdung 1936 bis 1939 und (3), nach einer Phase des Schweigens, die der schriftlichen Angriffe und Gegen angriffe seit 1946, in deren Zentrum die sogenannte Kulturismus-Revisionismus Debatte mit Marcuse von 1955/56 stand." (Noerr, Gunzelin Schmid, "Warum wir so handeln wollen, wie wir handeln müssen. Erich Fromm und das Institut für Sozialforschung" in *Fromm Forum*, 24 (2020), 42.) It is the first two phases which this paper is concerned with. A characteristic example of collaboration from their correspondence is quoted in Erich Klein-Landskron, "Max Horkheimer und Erich Fromm" in *Erich Fromm und die Frankfurter Schule*, eds. Michael Kessler and Rainer Funk (Francke Verlag, 1992), 161-163.

Fromm as part of the Institute for Social Research instead of using his biography as the primary framework for reading. This means that I have bracketed some major areas of his life-work, above all else his ethical thought, in the interest of focusing on Fromm's more strictly theoretical writings.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Materialist Microfoundations

Fromm dedicated a significant portion of his 1932 essay "The Method and Task of an Analytic Social Psychology: Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism" to refuting psychologistic interpretations of the materialist conception of history, which claimed that Marx argued all social action is directly psychologically motivated by economic interests. Some of these interpretations were from those opposed to Marxism, like Bertrand Russell, while others were from important "Marxists" themselves, such as the revisionist politician, Frankfurt professor, and future Nazi collaborator Henri de Man. Against these figures, Fromm argues that historical materialism is not at all psychologistic and involves only a handful of very basic psychological presuppositions, namely these: "*men make their own history; needs motivate men's actions and feelings (hunger and love); these needs increase in the course of historical development, thereby spurring increased economic activity.*"<sup>9</sup>

Historical materialism is not a psychologistic theory, but a number of important concepts within historical materialism have significant psychological aspects and are distorted if their psychological dimension goes unaccounted for. Fromm claims that psychoanalytic (social) psychology can explain the mediations which contribute to the reproduction of society—such as ideology—and in this way help make historical materialism a more comprehensive social theory. In modern social scientific terminology, these individual and small-scale phenomena out of which large-scale phenomena emerge are called 'microfoundations.' In the debates around Analytical Marxism in the 1980s, the search for microfoundations was associated with a commitment to methodological individualism and a skepticism towards functionalism. Fromm's critical and psychoanalytic approach to social theory provides an interesting contrast, however: his training as both a Weber-influenced sociologist and a psychoanalyst resulted in a strong commitment to methodological

<sup>8</sup> I have a forthcoming essay on the rational kernel(s) of Fromm's work as a whole forthcoming in the Winter 2024/2025 issue of *Parapraxis*.

<sup>9</sup> Erich Fromm, "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology," in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 150; emphasis in original.

individualism, while his subsequent conversion to Marxism resulted in an equally strong commitment to a critical form of functionalism as developed by the IfS.<sup>10</sup> The search for microfoundations of historical materialist critical social theory—i.e., explanations of the large-scale phenomena posited by historical materialism on the basis of the individual as conceived by psychoanalysis—was a crucial part of Fromm's project in the 1930s.

Microfoundations, certainly, but microfoundations of *what?* Fromm's goal was not the production of an action theory capable of accounting for *all* social phenomena through a universal psychoanalytic account of human motivation. Indeed, the psychoanalytic approach rather militates against attempting such a daring generalization, seeing as it has its origins in the understanding and treatment of *specifically pathological* mental processes. Fromm's goal was to analyze and establish microfoundations for a number of different institutions, relations, concepts, and so on which we can today group under the heading of *social reproduction* or, as Althusser would put it, *the reproduction of the relations of production*. (Fromm did not use the exact term 'social reproduction,' but the concept was used—sometimes verbatim, sometimes in so many words—by other members of the IfS (Horkheimer, Marcuse, Wittfogel, etc.) in their analyses of many of the same phenomena that Fromm focused on, such as ideology and the family.) The point is that his analyses, while playing a mediating and concretizing role in the structure of social theory overall, are still *somewhat abstract*. They lie within the domain of social theory, not purely empirically descriptive sociology.

The psychic relations and traits which contribute to the reproduction of society (and *that* they thus contribute) are the result of a reciprocal process of adaptation between the individual psyche and social practice, with the former being in a subordinate position to the latter. The individual psyche is constructed on the foundation of unconscious drives and 'wants' these drives to be satisfied. Psychoanalysis, in particular the clinical part, describes a number of different "defense mechanisms" by which 'thoughts' (inclusive of 'feelings,' 'desires,' etc.) are worked over and transformed by the mind: repression, sublimation, transference, displacement, etc.. Anyone making use of these psychoanalytic concepts must, however, resist the temptation to reduce them to empty formulae indifferent to the 'contents.' The concept of repression, for example, implies that the repressed contents are in some way psychi-

---

<sup>10</sup> See the account of Fromm's intellectual-historical background in the German *Geisteswissenschaften* in Daniel Burston, *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 99ff.

cally displeasing or painful. Because repression is the foundation for the other defense mechanisms, anyone who wants to use a concept such as sublimation or displacement must connect the content of that which is sublimated or displaced back to the original pleasure/displeasure matrix of repression.

## 2.1. Excursus on Fromm's Relation to Freud

Before moving forward, it is necessary to describe Fromm's relationship to Freud during this time. He can be characterized as neither heterodox nor orthodox, maintaining the majority of Freud's conceptual arsenal while also subtly shifting the emphasis and precise meaning of many terms. In 1936 he began to actually revise some of the fundamentals of Freudian psychoanalysis—above all else the theory of libido—and in 1937 produced an essay expounding these revisions. That essay, posthumously published in the volume *Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychology* (1992), was rejected for publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* by Horkheimer. The text is interesting from an intellectual-biographical perspective because it represents a transitional stage between the half-hearted adoption of libido theory in his earlier texts and the embrace of 'interpersonal' psychoanalysis which strongly characterizes *Escape from Freedom* and everything afterwards. The 1937 essay is a main point of reference for my reconstruction, as it brings out the critique of Freud implicit in the earlier essays while largely maintaining the systematic coherence of orthodox psychoanalytic terminology. The replacement for libido theory in the text is a theory of *object relations*, summarized by Fromm elsewhere as being "the person's (loving or hating) attitudes towards himself or other people he encounters; in a word, they are his emotions, feelings, and attitudes towards the surrounding world in general."<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, Fromm's use of the language of libido theory can be translated into a relational idiom with little being lost in the process.

Sections 3 and 4 below continue the march of concretion and detail two major areas of Fromm's work: what I have termed the 'psychic structures of social reproduction' and the family as a key mediating

<sup>11</sup> Fromm, "Psychoanalytic Characterology and Its Relevance for Social Psychology," in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 166. This view of object relations is greatly broadened in comparison to Freud's narrow and fragmentary treatment of the topic. It is a shame that Fromm did not take up Adorno on his request to collaborate on an essay analyzing the psychology of women under capitalism, wherein he intended to argue that women's social position in capitalism led them to unconsciously identify with commodities—see Wolfgang Bonß, *Dialektische Psychologie* (Springer VS, 2018), 141-2.

institution in the reproduction of capitalism.

### 3. Psychic Structures of Social Reproduction

Brute force and ‘rational’ or ‘egoistic’ interest are not sufficient to ensure the reproduction of society. Distinctively ‘psychic’ factors enter into the picture as well. Horkheimer already marked out this problem—the relation of ‘the psychic’ to the constitution and reproduction of society—as one of the main areas of investigation for the IfS in his 1931 inaugural address.<sup>12</sup> This section will reconstruct Fromm’s psychoanalytic characterology and his account of the ‘psychic structure of society,’ relating both to a conception of social-psychic ‘cement’ which is distinct from ideology. Ideology is assumed to be familiar already and is being analyzed in depth in an essay by Sam Thomas also in this issue. This being the case, it is treated here only very schematically, mainly to differentiate it from the other concepts and establish its relation to psychoanalysis.

#### 3.1. “Cement”

I begin with cement. While the metaphor of ‘social cement’ was commonplace in social science even during the heyday of the IfS, the first use of the concept in the corpus of the Frankfurt School comes from Fromm: “[the libidinal strivings of individuals] serve as the ‘cement’, [...] without which the society would not hold together, and which contributes to the production of important social ideologies in every cultural sphere.”<sup>13</sup> Fromm uses the adjective “libidinal” here not to define these strivings as narrowly sexual or concerned with physical pleasure, but to distinguish them from the supposedly objective or ‘rational’ interests which individuals and classes are often ascribed. In an unpublished text from 1934 titled “Die gesellschaftliche Bedeutung der Autorität in der gegenwärtige Familie” (“The Social Meaning of Authority in the Contemporary Family”), Horkheimer—perhaps with Fromm over his shoulder, given that the document ended up in Fromm’s papers—gives a more substantive definition of “cement” and sharply distinguishes it from ideology.<sup>14</sup> He defines ‘cement’ as “neither a purely economic

<sup>12</sup> Horkheimer, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (MIT Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Fromm, “Method and Function” in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 158.

<sup>14</sup> The document is technically unsigned but was almost certainly written by Horkheimer. It almost exactly mirrors the content and structure of Horkheimer’s “Allge-

moment, nor something detached from the economic base, but rather the inner content of the cultural, social, and psychic powers which work together to ensure that a determinate level of production and reproduction of economic life of human beings is maintained and accepted.”<sup>15</sup> The subsequent paragraph distinguishing ‘cement’ from ideology is worth quoting in full:

Delineation of cement from ideology. Ideology is false social consciousness and belongs solely to the restricting moments of a social period. Cement can indeed be a productive element, a productive force, yea, in a certain way even an explosive element, just as [it can be] conservative or limiting. There is cement in social orders in which there is no ideology. [The fact] that it has served specific class interests in all previous history, and its correlate class-character, is only one side [of the matter]. Moreover, it contains mechanisms without which we would be incapable of thinking human history.<sup>16</sup>

The cement concept should therefore be interpreted as designating a *functional property* of certain psychological (and social, cultural, etc.) relations and traits which enable social reproduction, while ideology is fundamentally conceived as social *false consciousness*, hence as something both distinctively cognitive and limiting.<sup>17</sup> In the interest of preserving the terminology used by Fromm and Horkheimer, then, “ideology” will

---

meiner Teil” essay from *Studien über Autorität und Familie* and therefore likely represents an early, schematic outline of that work. This conclusion is further supported by the text’s stylistic similarity to Horkheimer’s schematic essay “Bemerkungen über Wissenschaft und Krise” in the first volume of the ZfS, which was an early draft that Horkheimer was unable to finish due to an illness. A number of other documents related to the *Studien* also ended up in Fromm’s papers; see J.E. Morain, “The Origins of *Studien über Autorität und Familie*” (Critical Theory Working Group, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Erich Fromm Papers b. 7 f. 5 / r. 8; “Die gesellschaftliche Bedeutung...” Section I.2. German original: “weder ein rein oekonomisches Moment, noch etwas von der oekonomischen Basis Losgelöstes, vielmehr Inbegriff der kulturellen, sozialen, seelischen Mächte, die in ihrem Zusammenwirken dafuer sorgen, dass eine bestimmte Stufe der Produktion und Reproduktion des oekonomischen Lebens von den Menschen festgehalten und akzeptiert wird.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, Section I.3. German original: “Abgrenzung des Kitts von der Ideologie. Ideologie ist falsches, gesellschaftliches Bewusstsein und gehoert eindeutig zu den hemmenden Momenten einer geschichtlichen Periode. Kitt kann sowohl ein produktives Element sein, Produktivkraft, ja, [gewissermaessen] sogar ein sprengendes Element, wie auch konservierend oder fesselnd. Kitt gibt es auch in Gesellschaftsordnung, in denen es keine Ideologie gibt. Dass er in aller bisheriger Geschichte in wesentlichen bestimmten Klasseninteressen gedient hat, also sein jeweiliger Klassencharakter, ist nur seine eine Seite. Darueber hinaus enthaelt er Mechanismen, ohne die wir menschliche Geschichte nicht zu denken vermoegen.”

<sup>17</sup> In “Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History” (1930), Horkheimer defined the problem of ideology as that of “how the social situation relates to prevailing ideas that come to be recognized as false,” also noting that the asserting that a theory

here refer exclusively to ideology-qua-false-consciousness. “Cement,” is to be understood as the ‘canalization’ of human drives (“libido”) into activity (hence dispositions, individual psychic structures, etc.) which functionally serves the social process and reproduction of society. It is a *property*, not a *thing*, much in the way that the Frankfurt School developed an *adjectival* concept of ideology.

### 3.2. Psychic Structure

The capitalist’s desire to accumulate, the worker’s consent to exploitation: what are we to make of these? Marx was correct to reduce concrete individuals to mere ‘bearers’ of structurally determined class-roles, but only to a certain extent. It takes a certain kind of individual who has undergone a socially determined process of psychic formation to properly fill these class-roles, execute the duties imputed to them, and, indeed, derive satisfaction from doing so. One of the basic theses of critical theory is that *functionalism is not a presupposition of the social process but a result of it*. Even ‘rational’ interests must be inculcated.<sup>18</sup> Fromm’s analytic social psychology was, at least in part, an attempt to develop concepts suitable for the critical analysis of this process of functionalization from the specific standpoint of social psychology.

Throughout the 1930s, Fromm’s attempt to integrate psychoanalysis and historical materialism largely turned around one specific concept, which he variously called the ‘libidinal structure,’ ‘drive structure,’ and ‘psychic structure’ of society—I will stick to using the phrase ‘psychic structure (of society)’ because it does not imply adherence to libido theory. With regards to historical materialism, Fromm conceived the

---

is ideological requires an analysis of its social function for support—see Horkheimer, “Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 361 and 418, respectively. Horkheimer further specifies that “[e]very human way of acting which hides the true nature of society, built as it is on contrarieties, is ideological,” while stipulating that “many illusions [...] are not a form of ideology” in Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” in *Critical Theory*, 7. Horkheimer’s early account of ideology has been neatly summarized in Stanisław Czerniak, “Three Interpretations of the ‘Ideology’ Category. Max Horkheimer’s Conception of Ideology,” *Dialogue and Universalism* 33, no. 1 (2023). It is still appropriate to say, however, that the Frankfurt School did not have a really systematic account of ideology in the 1930s. See Sam Thomas’s essay On the Falsity of Prevailing Ideas in this journal issue for further elaboration on and reconstruction of the Frankfurt School’s concept of ideology.

<sup>18</sup> For example, peasants in the Middle Ages would often only engage in wage labor when forced to by conditions of social crisis and widespread poverty, even though many had free time enough to work in periods when wages were higher due to the lower labor supply. They had not been schooled in the ‘laws’ of supply and demand and were unresponsive to them.

psychic structure as a more or less distinct 'level' which existed between the economic base and cultural-political superstructure and mediated these two formations. The real meaning of the concept is more easily comprehended, however, if one considers it to be more like a 'dimension' of both the base and superstructure than an 'instance' or 'level' unto itself. It is in this sense that I understand the conjunction of Fromm's claim that "the libidinal structure of a society is the medium through which the economy exerts its influence on man's intellectual and mental manifestations" with his claim, made in the same paper, that "the realm of human drives is a natural force which [...] is an immediate part of the substructure [i.e. economic base -J.E.M.] of the social process."<sup>19</sup> The psychic structure is a "medium" which is simultaneously—and dialectically—constitutive of the things which it mediates, namely the base and superstructure. In the early version of Fromm's theory, the psychic substance of this medium consists mainly of biologically given psycho-somatic drives and their derivatives, while in the later version it consists of determinate relational orientations that are both historical and specifically psychic (as opposed to psycho-somatic). In both versions, the psychic structure of society has its only 'support' in concrete individuals and the institutions they make up; Fromm (and Horkheimer) always rejected the idea of a group-mind or collective unconscious, seeing such concepts as errors which presupposed without mediation the very thing they should have been explaining. Reconstructing Fromm's somewhat scattered explanations, we can see the the psychic structure as being primarily articulated on three distinct levels: first, as a somewhat amorphous "character matrix" of the psychic traits and orientations which predominate in a given social formation; second, as determinate socially typical character-structures distributed more or less in accordance with the principal forms of social stratification (class, gender, race, etc.); third, as the specific character of concrete individuals that has emerged from their particular life-histories—human living being understood as a fundamentally social process.<sup>20</sup>

Analytic social psychology investigates not just how the economic base or infrastructure conditions psychic development, but also how the economy is "psychologically possible" in the first place when considered

<sup>19</sup> Fromm, "Method and Function," in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 161 and 157.

<sup>20</sup> According to my reconstruction, then, Fromm was correct when he claimed that his later theory of social character was in essence the same as his earlier theory of psychic structure. I must emphasize, however, that the foregoing is a reconstruction of Fromm's views. In my opinion, the basically characterological nature of his conception of the psychic structure of society has some limitations when it comes to understanding certain supra-individual and group phenomena.

from the perspective of the mind and its development.<sup>21</sup> I give more attention to this latter problem in the below section on the family, but for now I will just mention one crucial concept for Fromm's answer to this question: adaptation. In the early 20th century, psychoanalytic theorists developed a distinction between alloplastic and autoplasic adaptation—modification by the organism of its environment and itself, respectively. Marxist psychoanalysts like Fromm and Wilhelm Reich found that the intense social and psychic repression characteristic of class society lead to the predominance of autoplasic adaptation. In other words, the weakness of individuals leads them to consciously and unconsciously adapt their behavior and psyche to be in accord with the demands of society. This means not just that desires necessarily contrathetical to the social order are strongly repressed, but also that desires only 'accidentally' opposed to the social order are made more compatible via aim-inhibition, sublimation, and the like.

One thing has to be addressed before proceeding to ideology, namely Horkheimer's claim that "there is cement in social orders in which there is no ideology." Fromm and Horkheimer hold out the possibility of a society in which psychic attachment to the social order is not something repressive and distorting but rather fulfilling, even pleasurable insofar as it meaningfully makes use of human potential. Fromm goes so far as to claim that "in a society where services performed for the whole society rather than property are the basis of social esteem, the same narcissistic impulses [which fuel the capitalist drive for acquisition] will find expression as a 'drive' to contribute to society in some important way."<sup>22</sup> Although their references on this point are principally to the mythical matriarchal past described (or imagined) by Johann J. Bachofen, they resonate with the forward-looking utopian visions of Charles Fourier.<sup>23</sup> This psychological dimension of utopia was elaborated on by the later Marcuse, as well as thinkers influenced by the Frankfurt School such as Fredric Jameson.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Fromm, "Method and Function," in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 159.

<sup>22</sup> Fromm, "Method and Function," in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see "The Theory of Mother Right and Its Relevance for Social Psychology" (1934) in Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*; "Family Sentiments" by Robert Briffault and "Robert Briffaults Werk über das Mutterrecht" by Fromm in ZfS II; "Die männliche Schöpfung" in the *Elektronische Erich Fromm Gesamtausgabe*; "Authority and the Family" in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*. Fromm—unlike Horkheimer—also looked towards Margaret Mead's ethnographies of non-state societies for examples of "social orders in which there is no ideology."

<sup>24</sup> Marcuse introduced the theme in *Eros and Civilization* (Beacon Press, 1955), after which it became a hallmark of his thought; Jameson's boldest work on the topic is

### 3.3. Ideology

For the Frankfurt School, ideology is false consciousness, and the emphasis here is on *false*, not *consciousness*. It is not, as in the work of Gramsci and many other Marxists, an ‘intermediate’ level of consciousness between immediate, commonsensical action and philosophy or science, nor is it a synonym of *Weltanschauung*. This characteristic conception of ideology has consequences for what an approach to the problem of ideology which is both psychoanalytic and critical-theoretical looks like. In this subsection, I outline the nature of such an approach and how it relates to the critique of ideology.

A crucial distinction must be established before the relation of psychoanalytic inquiry to the problem of ideology can be described. It is the distinction between the production and reproduction of ideology which Wilhelm Reich introduced in his 1932 study of the ideology of sexual morals, *The Imposition of Sexual Morality*.<sup>25</sup> The production of ideology is, we can say, something specifically *historical* or *diachronic*, even if the emergence of this or that ideological current cannot be decisively attributed to any specific individual(s). The reproduction of ideology is concerned with the process by which individuals come to ‘spontaneously’ speak, think, and behave ideologically, i.e. a specific process of social reproduction which can be seen *synchronously* as part of the machinery of a given social formation. Psychoanalytic inquiry is concerned—here at least—mainly with the reproduction of ideology.<sup>26</sup> A psychoanalytic inquiry into this process would have to analyze both the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of ideology—that is, both what functional role ideologies play at the level of society and how ideologies function at the level of the psyche (conceived, of course, as a complex drive-motivated entity which is mostly unconscious).<sup>27</sup> Both of these questions, in the

---

undoubtedly *An American Utopia* (Verso, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> A translation may be found in Wilhelm Reich, *Sex-Pol: Essays 1929-1934*, ed. Lee Baxandall, trans. Anna Bostock (Verso, 2012.)

<sup>26</sup> Fromm himself does not make the distinction and actually claims that psychoanalysis can explain the “production” of ideologies and “how the economic situation is transformed into ideology via man’s drives” in Fromm, “Method and Function,” in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 155, as well as 157 and 162. The essay in which he makes these claims was written, however, before the publication of Reich’s book, which was later positively reviewed by Fromm in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (ZfS II, 119ff). When Fromm uses the phrase “production of ideologies,” it is clear that he is referring to the process by which they become endemic in society, not how they emerge out of an individual’s mind.

<sup>27</sup> In terms of analyzing particular ideologies, Fromm spent the most of his energy in the 1930s working on bourgeois-protestant ideology; the texts “Psychoanalytic Char-

context of psychoanalysis, imply the necessity of going ‘beneath’ the level of ideology conceived as discursive-cognitive and investigating the socially typical (unconscious) psychic traits which form the psychic terrain, as it were, of individual socially important ‘ideologies’ and of ‘ideological’ behavior as such (which cannot always be readily identified with a particular ‘ideology’). Such a methodological distinction between the psychic basis of ideology and ideology as such does not entail an ‘ontological’ distinction between the two or a reduction of one to the other, but it must be kept in mind that the Frommian unconscious is still not so immediately political as the Deleuzeo-Guattarian.<sup>28</sup> All in all, these disciplinary and methodological factors mean that a psychoanalytic study of ideology is in important respects different from the critique of ideology as such, although both forms of investigation are able to inform one another and contribute to a systematic account of society as a totality in which disciplinary boundaries ultimately dissolve.

---

acterology and its Reference for Social Psychology” (1932), translated in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* and *Escape from Freedom* (1941) are the bookending examples of this decade-long research project.

<sup>28</sup> I say that we must not reduce one to the other, but Fábio De Maria, in De Maria, “Fromm and Horkheimer,” *Fromm Forum (English Edition)* 25 (2021), 48—relaying the opinion of Helmut Dahmer in Dahmer, *Libido und Gesellschaft* (Suhrkamp Verlag 1973), 311ff—notes that Fromm seems to reduce ideology to psychology in the very first paragraph of his essay “Über Methode und Aufgabe einer analytischen Psychologie” (1932). In reality, things are not so simple. For reference, the problematic sentence in the original German runs like this: “[Psychoanalyse] hat insbesondere private und kollektive Ideologien als Ausdruck bestimmter, trieblich verankelter Wünsche und Bedürfnisse entlarvt und auch in den ‘moralischen’ und ideellen Motiven verhüllte und rationalisierte Äußerungen von Trieben entdeckt” (ZfS I, 28). A literal translation, with my emphasis added, would be something like this: “Psychoanalysis has, in particular, unmasked private and collective ideologies as the expression of certain desires and needs anchored in [unconscious] drives and discovered hidden and rationalized manifestations of the drives in the ‘moral’ and ideal motives [of these ideologies].” Fromm’s 1970 translation of the offending passage, on the other hand, runs like this: “In particular, [psychoanalysis] has unmasked individual and collective ideologies as the expression of specific wishes and needs rooted in the instincts and shown that our ‘moral’ and idealistic motives are in some measure the disguised and rationalized expression of instinctual drives” (Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 135). De Maria therefore relies on an interpretation of this passage which is tendentious even when checked against the original German text and, moreover, contrary to the author’s own understanding of it as expressed in the later translation. Even if this singular sentence meant what De Maria claims, it would only thereby represent a contradiction within Fromm’s account of ideology, not the principle of it. More generally, De Maria and Dahmer fail to register the importance of collaboration in the working process of the IfS. These authors artificially read Horkheimer and Fromm’s texts from the height of their collaboration against one another instead of reading them with an eye to how they mutually reinforce one another.

## 4. The Family as Mediator

In this section I review the complex mediations described by Fromm which make the family a (if not *the*) decisive influence on the psychic development of individuals and the primary agent of socialization. The family was a central object of research for the IfS in the 1930s, and Fromm was arguably the leading force in this research effort.

From his first essay in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* onwards, Fromm makes a decisive break with Freud on the question of the family. Freud's speculative psychohistory conceived the history of humanity as the eternal return of the Oedipal family, raising the Oedipus complex to the level of an ultimate meaning and reducing society to a mirror of the Oedipal triangle. Fromm, however, rejects this absolute prioritization of the family and conceives it as an institution which is determined by social factors and therefore transmits a 'meaning' which is fundamentally social. Thus:

Of course, the first critical influences on the growing child come from the family. But the family itself, all its typical internal emotional relationships and the educational ideals it embodies, are in turn conditioned by the social and class background of the family; in short, they are conditioned by the social structure in which it is rooted. [...] The family in the medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child, and hence on the adult. *The family is the psychological agency [Agentur; agent in the sense of personal representative J.E.M.] of society.*<sup>29</sup>

The family is the *active agent* through which 'social contents' are transmitted and mediated to the individual psyche in formation (i.e., during childhood): "The family is the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts its formative influence on the individual's psyche."<sup>30</sup> The family crucially mediates the production of individuals and

---

<sup>29</sup> Fromm, "Method and Function," in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 142.

<sup>30</sup> Fromm, "Method and Function," in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 148. A variation on this thesis can be found in a set of Fromm's lecture notes from 1931: "Childhood experiences are the medium through which society shapes the individual!" (Erich Fromm Papers b. 18 f. 1 / r. 17; "Psychologie und Soziologie," p. 8). (German original: "Kindheitserlebnisse sind Medium, durch das die Gesellschaft den Einzelnen formt!") The extent of the family's importance for the socialization and psychological development of individuals was at times a matter of contention between Fromm and the others at the IfS (namely Adorno), and obviously continues to be an important theoretical problem to this day. The focus on the family as an agent of socialization in the works published in the ZfS is only one side of the story with Fromm; his articles on criminology published outside the ZfS testify to his knowledge that the State was another important agent of socialization and hegemony. If Fromm did not spend much time talking about education in his writings from this period, it is probably because his acquaintance Siegfried Bernfeld

therefore also the reproduction of the entirety of society. At every level of mediation, however, the ‘transmission’ (another way of translating *Vermittlung*) of contents and forms (socially functional traits) can break down: between society and family; between family and individual; and finally within the individual between conflicting psychic tendencies (or ‘agencies,’ ‘*Instanzen*,’ etc.). These sorts of breakdowns partially account for the difference between cases of ‘unhealthy’ individual mental pathology and the (air-quotes) normal “quasi-neurotic behavior of the masses,” which Fromm describes as “an appropriate reaction to current and real, though harmful and unsuitable, living conditions.”<sup>31</sup> Fromm further dealt with the family in his contribution to *Studien über Autorität und Familie*. He argued that the family is the first place where individuals are made to submit to irrational authority and acclimated to authoritarian interpersonal and social structures. Authority in the family prefigures the impositional character of society, the appearance of the social in class society as a factual, quasi-natural force external to the individual.<sup>32</sup> The introjection of familial—paradigmatically fatherly—authority takes the form of the superego, but the traits of the superego are then projected onto social authority figures.<sup>33</sup> This reciprocal process of introjection and projection means that the family and society are inseparably connected at the level of the structure of the unconscious (the superego).

was already working on a psychoanalytic Marxist account of education in works such as *Sisyphos oder die Grenzen der Erziehung* (1928, first edition 1925). See Gallistl, “Erich Fromm’s Early Work on Criminal Justice,” *Fromm Forum (English Edition)* 24 (2020), 80–100, for an overview of Fromm’s criminological writings.

<sup>31</sup> Fromm, “Politics and Psychoanalysis” (1929) in Bronner and Kellner, *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (Routledge, 1989), 218; cf. Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 145. At this point in time Fromm had, at least publicly, a sort of ‘nominalist’ concept of mental health according to which successful adaptation to social reality is the mark of mental health and failure to adapt the mark of pathology. He only developed a comprehensive account of his critical theory of mental health beginning in the 1940s.

<sup>32</sup> Fromm, “Studies on Authority and Family: Sociopsychological Aspects,” *Fromm Forum (English Edition)* 24 (2020), 15. It is at this point that I must voice another disagreement with De Maria’s critique of Fromm. De Maria has attempted to disassociate Fromm’s analysis of authority from Horkheimer’s account of reification and the ‘anthropology of the bourgeois era’ (“Fromm and Horkheimer,” 51 et passim). However, he fails to acknowledge the methodological difference between the ontogenetic analysis of the psychology of authority carried out by Fromm and Horkheimer’s historico-philosophical analysis of authority and reification in capitalist society. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the ontogenesis of the authority relation in the infantile situation cannot be meaningfully understood on the basis of reification, but neither can reification be understood on the basis of the infantile situation alone from the perspective of a critical theory of society.

<sup>33</sup> Fromm, “Sociopsychological Aspects,” loc. cit. Compare with W.F.Haug’s concept of the “Über-Uns” in *Elemente einer Theorie des Ideologischen* (Argument-Verlag, 1993), 61.

The analysis of the connection between family and society leads to a restatement of his earlier thesis on the family as the agency of society:

“[Freud] overlooked, however, that apart from the individual differences that exist in each family, families primarily represent certain social meanings and the family’s most important social function lies in their transmission [*Vermittlung*, mediation], and not in terms of the transmission of opinions and points of view, but rather in the production of the socially desired psychic structure.”<sup>34</sup>

Fromm’s distinction between the content (“opinions and points of view”) and form (“psychic structure”) of the mind is rather too strong; his analysis of authority shows that form and content cannot be so easily disentangled when dealing with the mind—on what side of this distinction does the superego lie? Nonetheless, Fromm is broadly correct in this critique of Freud, which concludes in the claim that “the father is for the child (in terms of time) the first to transmit social authority, however, (in terms of meaning) he does not model authority but rather imitates it.”<sup>35</sup>

The psychic traits and structures formed in the experience of childhood, above all else the superego, must be reinforced if they are to persist, however. Already in 1931 Fromm had described the way in which the social stratification of class society repeats the “infantile situation” and its authoritarian structure, thus reinforcing the introduction of social authority as superego.<sup>36</sup> Internal anxiety and guilt on the one hand and external force on the other are mutually dependent and reinforcing; the inculcation of the former in the family is both socially necessitated (as individual survival strategy) and functionally harnessed (as socialization from above) by the dominating social order which makes violence and exploitation its foundational principles. The idea of a ‘purely hegemonic’ society is just as incoherent as the idea of a ‘purely coercive’ one in part because the psychic traits which make hegemony socially possible are originally formed in reaction to both social and ‘private,’ familial coercion.

Focusing solely on the ‘negative’ side of authority and the family

<sup>34</sup> Fromm, “Sociopsychological Aspects,” 18.

<sup>35</sup> Fromm, op. cit., 19.

<sup>36</sup> Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture* (Routledge, 2004), 12. One can find in Fromm’s early work brief sketches of a theory of revolution centered around a dialectic of the oppressed class’s *Anlehnung* (attachment, dependence, ‘anaclisis’) and *Auflehnung* (revolt; Fromm’s sense is something like ‘violent detachment’) towards the ruling class. In a revolution, the repressed infantile impulse towards *Auflehnung* is reactivated, reclaimed, and mastered by the oppressed as they transcend the infantile situation imposed by society.

would paint an inaccurate picture, however. Fromm draws heavily from Freud's account of the ambivalence of the child's relation to the father in his analysis of authority and claims that affection is central to authority: the child wishes to be loved by the father, loves the father, and identifies with him. The family is a central influence for how an individual experiences love. The importance of the family for the individual's experience and conception of love (its association with authority, its limited character, etc.) should be uncontroversial, but this degree of importance is something socially determined; the experience of the family as a private 'reserve' is retroactively reinforced by the heartless and repressive social world of capitalism.<sup>37</sup> It is not simply the case that childhood family experiences determines one's psychic structure, rather one's 'future' or 'destiny' in society also turns out to have 'determined' the nature of their childhood and family insofar as the family serves its function vis-a-vis the reproduction of class, a process to which we can add today the reproduction of gender and race.

## 5. Dynamite

In this section I will review Fromm's early formulations on the psychic factors which contribute to social change, revolution, and crisis. I want to contest in particular Rolf Wiggershaus's judgment that Fromm's early formulations about revolution remained at the level of "ungrounded dogmatic assertion."<sup>38</sup> I begin with what can be called the 'positive' side of Fromm's work on social change—crisis as *breakthrough*—before engaging with the more 'negative' side—crisis as *breakdown*.

Fromm made some brief but enlightening remarks on the nature of revolutionary collective action in relation to psychological explanation. In the lecture notes for his 1931 course on psychology and sociology, he noted that revolutions are inexplicable from the perspective of 'rational' egoistic-utilitarian interest, as "clearly there are millions of people who would rather go hungry for years than uphold this social order."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> See the remarks on the family in Fromm, *Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychology* (American Mental Health Foundation Books, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*. Tr. Michael Robertson (MIT Press, 1995), 120

<sup>39</sup> Erich Fromm Papers b. 18 f. 1 / r. 17; "Psychologie und Soziologie," p. 8. German original: "offenbar gibt es Millionen von Menschen, die lieber jahrelang hungern als diese gesellschaftlichen Zustände [aufrechterhalten]." Horkheimer had already made some groping gestures towards this sort of realization in the reflections on revolution contained in *Dämmerung*, a book consisting of aphorisms and brief essays written between 1929 and 1931, e.g. "A Discussion About Revolution;" "Such Is The World;" etc. *Dämmerung*

Revolutions fly in the face of economicistic, bourgeois explanations of social action, which generally categorize them as irrational outbursts fueled by the foolishness of the masses and the lies of outside agitators. For Fromm, however, people are neither inherently egoistic nor altruistic. Rather, the degree of these sorts of attitudes is determined by dynamic adaptation to the environment and social situation. The revolutionary conjunction of sympathy of the oppressed for their fellow downtrodden and hatred of the oppressed for their dominators is only ever unleashed at a mass scale in certain situations; Fromm considered investigating the problem of exactly *which* situations are correlate with such psychic upheavals and *why* to be one of the major tasks of analytic social psychology.

In two early texts, namely *The Dogma of Christ* and the lecture notes for his 1931 course on psychology and sociology, Fromm seems to suggest that hatred—the class hatred of the oppressed towards their oppressors—is the decisive revolutionary affect, claiming for example that “Psychoanalysis shows [...] that the desire for the ruin of the ruling class can indeed be stronger than the desire for a decent life and security!”<sup>40</sup> While this positive evaluation of hatred can be seen as a necessary corrective to the rosy conceptions of social change found in the revisionist and reformist Marxists of the time, I find that it goes too far. It is my opinion that “the desire for a decent life” is typically a more important motivating factor for revolutionary change than hatred. Moreover, the two factors are not mutually exclusive but would probably be mutually reinforcing in a truly revolutionary situation where, to paraphrase Lenin, the ruling classes are *unable* to continue ruling and living in the established way and betterment of living conditions therefore necessitates their overthrow.

Fromm also analyzed the ways in which psychic factors contribute

---

is translated in Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1929-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans.. Michael Shaw (Seabury Press, 1978).

<sup>40</sup> Erich Fromm Papers b. 18 f. 1 / r. 17; “Psychologie und Soziologie,” p. 8. German original: “Psychoanalyse zeigt, [...] dass sogar der Wunsch nach Sturz der herrschenden Klasse stärker sein kann als der Wunsch nach gutem Leben und Sicherheit!” A few years later in a text titled “Zur psychologischen Struktur der Autorität” Fromm turned his attention to the displacement of “Hass und Aggression” towards authority figures onto socially acceptable targets (Erich Fromm Papers b. 7 f. 6 / r. 9 “Zur psychologischen Struktur...” 7-8). It is notable that these two texts which bring up hatred in relation to the psychological foundations of revolution were written before the Nazi seizure of power, and that the topic all but disappears as time goes on. When he later returned to the “revolutionary character” in his 1963 treatment of the subject, he followed the individual-characterological indications of the 1930s in taking independence, love, critical thinking, etc. to be the most significant traits (Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ*, 128f).

to social dysfunction. As has been established, Fromm and the Frankfurt School did not consider functionalism to be a fundamental feature of society, but rather the result of variously adaptative, cooperative, coercive, and manipulative forms of human interaction. The upshot of this is that the functionalization of human drives can break down, and “libidinal energies” can, as Fromm puts it, “cease to be ‘cement,’ and turn into ‘dynamite.’”<sup>41</sup> This can happen in a basically ‘revolutionary’ way (see above), or it can happen because the established ‘canalizations’ of human drives “lag” behind the tendential development of society, the necessities of social reproduction, the plans of the ruling class, or some other socially determining factor.<sup>42</sup> The tendency towards lag is stronger than that towards progress in Fromm’s estimation. This is because the psychic character of mature individuals is relatively fixed, and progressive changes in the socially hegemonic forms of canalizing human drives have to fight against this powerful force of psychic inertia acting in favor of the established order.<sup>43</sup>

Between revolutionary progress and inertial archaism, there is one significant ‘ambivalent’ or ‘intermediate’ phenomenon to consider: rebellion. Fromm first drew a distinction between rebellion and revolution early in the 1930s.<sup>44</sup> As noted above, he acknowledged the role of hatred and aggression in the psychic constitution of revolutions early on, but he increasingly paid attention to what could be called the ‘non-aggressive’ aspects of revolution in order to distinguish it from mere rebellion. According to Fromm, rebellion is psychologically distinguished from revolution principally by its attitude towards authority:

We would suggest that this process of defiant revolt [*Auflehnung*] against heretofore existing authority accompanied by the perpetuation of the authority-structure be called ‘rebellion.’ Fundamentally distinct from this is the destruction of the authoritarian attitude in which the authority-structure itself is destroyed and psychological independence takes the place of psychological dependence. In distinction to ‘rebellion,’ we would designate this process as ‘revolution’ in the psychological sense.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Fromm, “Method and Function,” in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 161.

<sup>42</sup> See 157 in op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> See also Horkheimer’s invocation of “cultural lag” in Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 65.

<sup>44</sup> This distinction was a crucial theme for the IfS in the mid 1930s to early 1940s. It informed their work on antisemitism in general as well as *Einzelstudien* such as Horkheimer’s essay “Egoism and Freedom Movements” (1936, translated in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*) and Adorno’s study of Wagner, which was written in the 1930s but not published until the 1950s.

<sup>45</sup> Erich Fromm Papers b. 7 f. 6 / r. 9; “Zur psychologischen Struktur der Autorität,” 25-6; cf. Fromm “Sociopsychological Aspects,” 54. German original: Wir würden vorschla-

Fromm further stipulates that a psychological “revolution” at the level of society as a whole can only come about as the practice of a class which has overcome its oppression, achieved control over the social process, and instituted a rationally planned social order.<sup>46</sup> Rebellion, on the other hand, can be summarized as a change in object without a change in the way of relating to objects; the rebel’s defiance towards authority is itself authoritarian. In society, rebellion takes on the appearance of revolution but enacts reaction. The phenomenon of psychological rebelliousness can be considered both a symptom and exacerbating cause of general social (-psychological) crisis, as seen in both the era of the Protestant Reformation and bourgeois revolutions and the then-contemporary era of fascism.

Thus, Fromm’s work counsels us to always keep the ambivalent potential of crisis in mind. Beyond the dichotomy of love and hate, the specific articulation of hatred—as class hatred, xenophobia, or something else—is one of the most important psychic factors in determining the direction of a social upheaval.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

What I most hope is that my reconstruction of Fromm’s contributions to Critical Theory helps to substantiate early Critical Theory as an admittedly incomplete but nonetheless systematic and thorough social theory. This is part of the broader project of the Critical Theory Working Group to recover the full extent of Critical Theory from the distorted reception which has prevailed for the last several decades. I also hope that this reconstruction has illustrated some considerable similarities between early Critical Theory and other critical forms of Marxism, such as those of Gramsci, Althusser, and Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom were

---

gen, diesen Vorgang der trotzigen Auflehnung gegen bisherige Autorität bei Beibehaltung der Autoritätsstruktur Rebellion zu nennen. Grundsätzlich davon unterschieden ist die Zerstörung der Autoritätseinstellung, wenn die Autoritätsstruktur selbst zerstört wird und anstelle der psychischen Abhängigkeit psychische Selbständigkeit tritt. Zum Unterschied von der Rebellion würden wir diesen Vorgang als Revolution im psychologischen Sinn bezeichnen.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Fromm was, of course, referring to the proletariat. This plan-based ‘control’ also provisionally extends to nature, potentially even including a fundamental change in attitude towards the “relative helplessness of human beings in the face of their biologically conditioned fate” and the “old Buddhist trio: aging-sickness-death” (“Zur psychologischen Struktur...” 27). The idea is sometimes expressed by Fromm with the word *Beherrschung* (domination, mastery), while in other instances he uses the less aggressive word *Bewältigung* (coping, management). The latter is more in the spirit of the project of Fromm and the Frankfurt School as a whole.

important reference points for this essay.

I have not been able to capture every dimension of Fromm's work in this essay. Insofar as I have confronted the problem of the relation of society and nature in his thought during the writing of this essay, I have placed the accent on society and de-emphasized his avowed conception of psychoanalysis as a 'natural science.' My intent in doing so was to show that the real content of his work militates against such an understanding of psychoanalysis in particular and the social and human sciences in general.

One consideration I was not able to incorporate into the main body of the essay is that of the need for historical reflexivity in Critical Theory. Fromm's work contributed to the Frankfurt School's reflexivity—i.e., its account of its own possibility and actuality—through his analysis of socio-psychological crisis and his theory of matricentricity. The former is simple enough: a group of intellectuals from bourgeois backgrounds joining together to criticize bourgeois society in the name of socialism presupposes some problem in the reproduction of the bourgeoisie at the individual level. Conversely, Fromm claimed that "the psychic basis of the Marxist social programme was predominantly the matricentric complex," and that Marxism was the "rational, scientific expression of ideas that could only be expressed in fantasy under earlier economic conditions: Mother Earth gives all her children what they need, without regard for merits."<sup>47</sup> In other words, Marxism (or Critical Theory) represented the conscious elaboration of the repressed utopian impulse that under the oppressive conditions of class society could previously only be expressed in unconscious fantasy or its artistic sublimation (as well as occasionally in interpersonal love). Fromm's use of the Bachofenian theory of matriarchy and matricentricity to ground this utopian impulse is emblematic of the characteristic mixture of classical German philosophies such as idealism and romanticism with Marxist materialism that the Frankfurt School developed.

It is worth briefly reflecting on some limitations of Fromm's early work; there are three that main ones I would like to mention. As discussed above, Fromm had an ambivalent stance towards Freud's metapsychology of drives. This led to a lack of clarity and precision when he turned to analyzing the most fundamental elements of the psyche, as he only began to develop an alternative metapsychology based in object relations at the very end of his time as a member of the IfS. The theory outlined

<sup>47</sup> Fromm, "The Theory of Mother Right and its Relevance for Social Psychology," (1934) in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 134.

in the 1937 essay would itself be revised again by the time Fromm published *Escape from Freedom* in 1941. *Escape* ended up being the text that properly initiated his mature theory, which was decisively influenced by Harry Stack Sullivan's ideas and the renewed appreciation for religion that Fromm developed in the US.

Fromm's lack of direct attention to issues of gender and race/ethnicity is also disappointing, although unexceptional within the context of the IfS in the 1930s. His approach to gender was conditioned by his reception of Bachofen throughout his entire career. While this immunized him to certain misogynistic strands of thought often found in early psychoanalysis and German intellectual culture more broadly, it was in influence which was not entirely productive of analysis of contemporary relations of gender and sexuality.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Fromm took over the paternalistic homophobia of early psychoanalysis that judged queer people as having failed to fully mature into genital heterosexuality.<sup>49</sup> Race appears as an even greater blindspot for Fromm than gender. Even after moving to the United States, he never really addressed the mechanics, history, and psychic impact of racialization in his analytic social psychology. He also largely neglected to analyze a form of prejudice which undoubtedly hit closer to home, namely anti-semitism.<sup>50</sup> In accordance with the theoretical position of the IfS at the time, his early social-psychological analyses of fascism and nazism focus more on the family, the dynamics of authority, and the class structure of Germany than anti-semitism and racism.

The third weakness is the complete absence of a theory of groups or group dynamics. This absence is, like the previous limitation, common to the Frankfurt School in general; exceptions are found in Horkheimer's

<sup>48</sup> I do not mean to say that Fromm never said anything worthwhile about gender. One of his most interesting early essays, "Die männliche Schöpfung," is an adventurous psychoanalytic feminist analysis of the Book of Genesis and the Babylonian Enuma Elish which uses the ideas of Bachofen (and Groddeck, probably by way of his then-paramour Karen Horney) to critique these texts as patriarchal fantasies motivated by womb envy. He even goes so far as to designate the patriarchal fantasy of man being capable of both siring (*Zeugen*) and birthing (*Gebären*) as "das Urbild alles idealistischen, sich über die natürlichen Bedingungen und Gegebenheiten hinwegsetzenden Denkens," implicitly positing an inseparable link between materialism and feminism thereby (E-GA XI-206).

<sup>49</sup> I refer to the remarks on homosexuality in Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (Harper & Brothers, 1956). Fromm also more tentatively connected homosexuality with sadomasochism and authoritarianism in his essay for the volume *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (Dietrich zu Klampen Verlag, 1963); see Institut für Sozialforschung, *Studien*, 125f.

<sup>50</sup> However, Roger Frie has recently published a book that compellingly argues for the impact of the Third Reich and the Holocaust on Fromm's life and thought; see Frie, *Edge of Apocalypse: Erich Fromm, Fascism, and the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

abortive theory of rackets, related strands of thought from the period of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Benjamin's analysis of 'the crowd.' Fromm's analysis of the family—and this also goes for Horkheimer and Adorno's work on the topic—generally does not lend any autonomy to family as a group-formation. What is present in the family is mainly society and the individual. Again, Fromm's hesitation to simply accept Freud's theories was a double-edged sword, as the focus on the influence of social factors in the development of authority and the superego in the family tended to eclipse the important group dynamics which Freud had discovered in his almost a-social theory of the oedipus complex and "family romance."

## Bibliography

The *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* is cited as (ZfS [volume in roman numerals], [page number]). The Erich Fromm Papers at the New York Public Library are cited as (Erich Fromm Papers b. [box number], f. [file number] / r. [microfilm reel number]; [title of document], [page or section number])

The Erich Fromm Elektronische Gesamtausgabe is cited as (E-GA [volume in roman numerals]-[page number]).

Abromeit, John. *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Bernfeld, Siegfried. *Sisyphos oder die Grenzen der Erziehung*, 2. Auflage. Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1928.

Bonß, Wolfgang. *Dialektische Psychologie: Adornos Rezeption der Psychoanalyse*. Springer VS, 2018.

Bonß, Wolfgang. "Kritische Theorie als empirische Wissenschaft: Zur Methodologie 'postkonventioneller' Sozialforschung." *Soziale Welt*, 1983, 34. Jahrg., H. 1 (1983), pp. 57-89

Bonß, Wolfgang and Honneth, Axel, eds. *Sozialforschung als Kritik: Zum sozialwissenschaftlichen Potential der Kritischen Theorie*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982.

Burston, Daniel. *The Legacy of Erich Fromm*. Harvard University Press, 1991.

Czerniak, Stanisław. "Three Interpretations of the 'Ideology' Category. Max Horkheimer's Conception of Ideology." *Dialogue and Universalism*, 33 (1), 2023, pp. 91-109.

- Dahmer, Helmut. *Libido und Gesellschaft: Studien über Freud und die Freudsche Linke*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973.
- De Maria, Fábio. "Fromm and Horkheimer: On the fundamentals of Critical Theory's anthropology." *Fromm Forum (English Edition)*, 25, 2021, pp. 42-62
- Dubiel, Helmut. *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*. Tr. Benjamin Gragg. MIT Press, 1985.
- Erich Fromm papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library
- Frie, Roger. *Edge of Catastrophe: Erich Fromm, Fascism and the Holocaust*. Oxford University Press, 2024.
- Friedman, Lawrence J. *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Fromm, Erich. *Elektronische Erich Fromm-Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Rainer Funk. Open Publishing, 2016
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Studies on Authority and Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions," tr. Susan Kassouf. *Fromm Forum (English Edition)*, 24, 2020, pp. 8-58 [1936]
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Escape from Freedom*. Henry Holt and Company, 1994 [1941].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Art of Loving*. Harper & Brothers, 1956.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture*. Routledge, 2004 [1963].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx, and Social Psychology*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study*. Ed. Wolfgang Bonß; Tr. Barbara Weinberger; Berg Publishers, 1984 [1980].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychology*. Ed. Rainer Funk. American Mental Health Foundation Books, 1992.
- Funk, Rainer. *Life Itself Is an Art: The Life and Work of Erich Fromm*. Tr. Susan Kassouf. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
- Gallistl, Adrian. "Erich Fromm's Early Work on Criminal Justice: Its Historical and Current Significance." *Fromm Forum (English Edition)*, 24, 2020, pp. 80-100.

- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz. *Elemente einer Theorie des Ideologischen*. Argument-Verlag, 1993.
- Honneth, Axel. *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*. Trans. Kenneth Baynes. MIT Press, 1993.
- Horkheimer, Max. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Continuum, 1972.
- . *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1929-1931 and 1950-1969*, tr. Michael Shaw. Seabury Press, 1978.
- . *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*. MIT Press, 1993.
- Institut für Sozialforschung. *Studien über Autorität und Familie: Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung*. Dietrich zu Klampen Verlag, 1963 [1936].
- . *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*
- Jameson, Fredric. *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. Verso, 2016.
- Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical Imagination: a History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research*. University of California Press, 1996 [1973].
- Kessler, Michael and Funk, Rainer, eds. *Erich Fromm und die Frankfurter Schule*. Francke Verlag, 1992.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press, 1974 [1955].
- Morain, J.E. "The Origins of Studien über Autorität und Familie." *Critical Theory Working Group Blog*, 27 April 2024, [https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/origins\\_of\\_the\\_family/](https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/origins_of_the_family/)
- Noerr, Gunzelin Schmid. "Warum wir so handeln wollen, wie wir handeln müssen. Erich Fromm und das Institut für Sozialforschung." *Fromm Forum*, 24 (2020), 41-57.
- Reich, Wilhelm. *Sex-Pol: Essays 1929-1934*. Ed. Lee Baxandall. Verso Books, 2012.
- Wiggershaus, Rolf. *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson. MIT Press, 1995.

# Horkheimer's Materialism vs Morals and Metaphysics: Its Limitations and Possibilities

Esther Planas Balduz

For all its insight into the individual steps in social change and for all the agreement of its elements with the most advanced traditional theories, the critical theory has no specific influence on its side, except concern for the abolition of social injustice.

—Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory", 1968.

In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality.

—Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944-2002.

For the Marxist materialist, value judgement generally appears in two forms: as the return of the repressed in undecidable moral conflicts, and as the comprehensive judgement of the materialist. It can be argued, however, that for Max Horkheimer conflicts over moral wrongs and moral rights nevertheless take place in a worthless, wrong, false society or world. However, this assessment already implies that a value judgement has been activated in that which is judged as wrong, false, or worthless: the world qua society as a totality.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Different translations use conflicting terms for the original German term –*falsche* – that was used by Horkheimer (and Adorno) in some English renderings we find the word “false” and in others “wrong.” The same happens with some concepts related to totality, one is “society” and the other is “world.” A specific reference to the “wrong world” appears, for instance, in Theodor W. Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, when he explains the necessity of dialectics as “the ontology of the wrong state of things,” and then more exactly: “The chances are that every citizen of the *wrong world* [emphasis added] would find the right one unbearable; he would be too impaired for it.” Adorno, T. W. (1990) *Negative Dialectics*, trans, E.B. Ashton (London, Routledge) 11, 352. However, Max Horkheimer echoes this standpoint when he states that, “I can say what is wrong, but I cannot say what is right.” Max Horkheimer as quoted in W. Bonefeld, “Emancipatory Praxis and Conceptuality in Adorno,” in *Negativity & Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*, edited by F. Matamoros, S. Tischler, J. Holloway, 2009, 145.

From the depths of this wrong world, Horkheimer's essays on materialism, morality, and metaphysics trace the categories belonging to each field of argument back to the modern tension between 'subjective' and 'social' value judgments about what is considered socially and personally unbearable. In these texts, Horkheimer shows us how sociology and positivist philosophy repeat this core tension through the rejection of value judgement, which binds them to their negative doubles – idealist moral philosophy of unconditional obligation and proto-totalitarian romanticism of unconditional self-determination. Given Horkheimer's concern in these essays with questions of the individual in relation to the moral law, how can we relate his arguments to the 'second nature' laws of the market? And how can we point out the probable error of the total abandonment of morality (as ethics) for the Marxist critical theorist and his aspirations, when confronted with the amoral morality of the actions and critique of socialism of the neoliberal philosophers?

## 1. Horkheimer's Critical Theory: A Negative Stream of Morals?

Max Horkheimer's account of materialism versus morals and metaphysics in his essays for the Institute for Social Research (IfS) like "Materialism and Morality" (1933) and "Materialism and Metaphysics" (1933) brings to the fore the crisis inherent in the critique of the Enlightenment. More specifically, it reveals the crisis in its establishment of moral principles understood as practical social imperatives – a tendency most explicitly exposed in Hegel's critique of Kant's moral arguments through his concept of the Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*).<sup>2</sup> The break with Kantian

---

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Hyppolite on morality versus ethical life in Hegel: "...Hegel investigates beyond morality (Moraltät), which according to Kant and Fichte expresses only the point of view of the acting individual, the living reality of morals and institutions (Sittlichkeit). Virtue, in the present sense of the term, has a clearly individualistic meaning. It corresponds to the moment of opposition between the individual and his people." It was not like ancient virtue which was a substantial virtue," which found its content in the very life of the people. In order to make the very important distinction which Hegel makes here between the terms Moralität and Sittlichkeit, we shall adopt the expressions "morality" and "ethical world" as a practice. The choice of the word "ethical" is of course rather arbitrary, but it has the advantage of being connected etymologically to the Greek term ethos (custom, use), which Hegel considers as being equivalent to the German term Sitte. Doubtless the word "morality" is also connected to mores, but this inevitable etymology certainly indicates that morality in the Kantian sense of the term is only a part, and not the whole, of ethical life. It corresponds only to the stage of subjective reflection and is situated between the immediate life in a people and the objective organization of society and state." Jean Hyppolite, *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History*, trans. Bond Harris

*Moralität* implied in Hegel's critique of it seemed later to be furthered (or perhaps even completed?) by Karl Marx in his critical depreciation of morality as a mere tactical mediation by the bourgeoisie in order to effectively subjugate a class it needed to control and dominate.<sup>3</sup> This is noted in Jean Hippolite's account of the case, but the story is being treated here in a more holistic sense, where all the facets and tensions intrinsic to the prior rejection and critique of morality are seen expanding to a rejection of ethics, as we see happening from Marx on.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the bourgeois moral field of the Enlightenment exercised a self-regulating and repressive subjection of its peers at a time when it enjoyed the egoistic transactive presumption of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.<sup>5</sup> However, as it has been pointed out by Ferenc Feher, Kant's political philosophy (beyond his explicit work on morals and the corpus of his critiques) cannot be ignored when considering what from Kant's system was preserved and integrated into Marx's work and critical methodology.<sup>6</sup> This point was

and B. Spurlock Jacqueline (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 8.

<sup>3</sup> "The question whether Marx's theory has a moral or ethical dimension is one of the most controversial of all issues of Marx interpretation. The difficulty is easily seen. On the one hand, Marx has a number of uncompromisingly negative things to say about morality. Moreover, after 1845 at least, he affirms that his own theory is not a utopian or ethical one but 'real positive science.' Yet, on the other hand, much of the language that he uses to describe capitalism is plainly condemnatory (for instance, that it is antagonistic, oppressive, and exploitative). Does this not represent an inconsistency on Marx's part? Is he not moralizing and rejecting morality at the same time?" Michael Rosen, "The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology," in *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*, ed. Edward Harcourt (Oxford University Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 2 above on Jean Hippolite's description of the diversion from morals in Kant. For us, there is no strong separation between morals and ethics. This is not because there are no interpretative facets and crises involving these terms, but precisely because all such problems are inevitably included when the matter is interpreted by critics and antagonists – present here both in the form of both left-wing, Marxist materialists and right-wing, fascistic radical libertarians, who will be cited further below. However, across the work of Horkheimer (as well as Adorno, Furner, and Rose) we will find that these concepts and variants are sometimes conflated, as when Horkheimer speaks of "...a philosophical system, an ethic, a moral teaching" Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969*, trans. Michael Shaw, (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 34–5.

<sup>5</sup> See Marx and Engels, "Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality, A Contribution to German Cultural History, Contra Karl Heinzen," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6, 1845–48: *Principles and Manifesto* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976). 312–340.

<sup>6</sup> "Immanuel Kant, and not Hegel, who forged a methodological axiom from this attitude, was the first great political philosopher of modernity. In marked contrast to most of his predecessors Kant did not design political-philosophical blueprints for future action from past models. Rather, through constant thought experiments, Kant transformed the present process understood as history into the raw material as well as a treasure trove of unresolved dilemmas for political philosophy." Ferenc Fehér, "Practical Reason in the

somehow supported—albeit in an accusatory, negative way—by the (counter-revolutionary) Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises early in the 20th century in his obsessive effort to debunk Marx, socialism, and all of its philosophers when he defined the idealist philosophy of Kant as to be the root of all of its evils.<sup>7</sup> It is worth quoting von Mises at length here, if only to illustrate and help us to situate those paradoxical elements, constituted in the rejection of morality, which inhabit the Marxist materialist philosophers. Marx and the Marxists had categorically rejected the use of morals and the appeal to ethics, while at the same time being accused of promoting an essentially moral and ethical enterprise. In a chapter subsection titled “The Categorical Imperative as a Foundation for Socialism” von Mises is indeed categorical:

Engels called the German Labour Movement the heir to the German classical philosophy. It would be more correct to say that German (not only Marxian) Socialism represents the decadence of the school of idealist philosophy. Socialism owes the dominion it won over the German mind to the idea of society as conceived by the great German thinkers. Out of Kant's mysticism of duty and Hegel's deification of the State it is easy to trace the development of socialist thought; Fichte is already a socialist. In recent decades the revival of Kantian criticism, that much praised achievement of German philosophy, has benefited Socialism also. The Neo-Kantians, especially Friedrich Albert Lange and Hermann Cohen, have declared themselves socialists. Simultaneously marxians have tried to reconcile Marxism with the New Criticism. Ever since the philosophical foundations of Marxism have shown signs of cracking, attempts to find in critical philosophy support for socialist ideas have multiplied. (...) The weakest part of Kant's system is his ethics. Although they are vitalized by his mighty intellect, the grandeur of individual concepts does not blind us to the fact that his starting-point is unfortunately chosen and his fundamental conception a mistaken one. His desperate attempt to uproot Eudemonism has failed.<sup>8</sup>

Von Mises was ably refuted by his Marxist opponents, the Austro-marxists Max Adler and Helene Bauer, but seeing the nature of von Mises's critique of Kant, Hegel, and Marx in the light of our present situation, we feel compelled to reflect on the possibility that the rejection of morality in Marx and the Marxists after him arose from (and, by its very nature, responded to) the need to avoid the liberal's legacy

---

Revolution: Kant's Dialogue with the French Revolution,” in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, ed. Ferenc Fehér (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 204–5.

<sup>7</sup> For a Marxist view of Von Mises and context, see John Bellamy Foster, “Absolute Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* 71, no. 1 (May 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism*, trans. J. Kahane, 6th ed, Liberty Fund Library of the Works of Ludwig von Mises (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 2014), 430.

of constant accusations that their project was excessively moralistic.<sup>9</sup> Today, von Mises and his disciples seem to have won the conscience of our global Western world, though not without having had to invest an unprecedented amount of (black) gold to take action (often militarily) in the most ruthless and undemocratic tactical interventions around the globe, as Jessica Whyte has very well explained in her work *The Morals of the Market*.<sup>10</sup>

The question of morality in Marx has been interrogated many times, but that question has not generally been given a central role in the Marxist research on the Frankfurt School. Our argument here is that the critique of morality and metaphysics in Horkheimer's early work uses – or rather, is based on – a Kantian form of values and judgements that allows (and sustains) his critique of specific moral and metaphysical trends of his time. This means that the critical rejection of the Kantian system and its (moral) categorical imperative was not fully achieved, nor was the Kantian system fully overcome. Rather, it was merely sublated, transported, or smuggled back through a moral transplantation of an anti-moral core. This Kantian legacy then appears as an antinomy at the heart of Horkheimer's critique of morality, insofar as these critiques inherit the Kantian form, albeit in their own specificity: mediated by either Hegel's or Marx's sublations of the two systems. The Marxian sublation of the Kantian form is used to enable the negative but morally invested content of a critique of all the problematic aspects of

<sup>9</sup> See the refutations against Von Mises by Helen Bauer. According to Dunja Larise: "Helene Bauer was one of the leading economists of Austro-Marxism, an intellectual circle close to Austria's Social Democratic Workers' Party between two world wars, which aimed to create a new socialist society by democratic means. Between 1923 and 1926, she contended with what would later become known as the Austrian School of Economics and its' most remarkable theoreticians: Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich von Hayek, and Joseph Schumpeter. These debates revolved around issues relevant even today. Although important for the history of economic theory and methodology in the social sciences, these debates were largely forgotten. The present article aims at filling this gap by revisiting the debate between Helene Bauer and the Austrian School of Economics around the general conceptions of the theory of value, attribution of value, and an appropriate methodology for the study of economics as a social science. The last part of the article shows a discord between Helene Bauer and Ludwig Mises on social justice, democracy, and authoritarianism in interwar Austria." Dunja Larise, "Helene Bauer and Austrian School of Economics: Disputes on Neoliberalism and Social Democracy in the Early Twentieth Century," *Revue Européenne Des Sciences Sociales* 61, no. 1 (May 2023): 221–41.

<sup>10</sup> That the progress towards a conscience that evolves to an organic socialism has proved to be a real threat for all these radical capitalist amoral moralists, and their vision and project had needed to employ vast masses of money and plot to achieve its goals for disparaging such organic evolution. Jessica Whyte explains this very well in *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2019).

the base and superstructure of our capitalist regime and the relational and dependency dynamics of its (Western and globalist) society: its political economy, its legal system, its ideology, and all its dominant forms of imperialism and class domination. (The apparent sublating and activating of the Kantian form by Marx and the paradoxes that it generates is explored by James Furner, as we will see further below.)

Horkheimer's core dialectical proposal in relation to "the economy" will serve us here in presenting his account, in which the tensions over morality and ethics are played out in the materialist critique of the capitalist world:

The economy is the first cause of wretchedness, and critique, theoretical and practical, must address itself primarily to it. It would be mechanistic, not dialectical thinking, however, to judge the future forms of society solely according to their economy. Historical change does not leave untouched the relations between the spheres of culture, and if in the present state of society economy is the master of man and therefore the lever by which he is to be moved to change, in the future men must themselves determine all their relationships in the face of natural necessities. Economics in isolation will therefore not provide the norm by which the community of men is to be measured.<sup>11</sup>

Later in this essay we will see Horkheimer's claim that metaphysics has missed its historical chance and thus failed society – a lament for metaphysics similar to Marx's earlier lament for philosophy. My argument here is that in order to critique morality, Horkheimer still required (and was methodologically dependent upon) the deployment of the structural element of practical moral philosophy as form, while simultaneously inverting – in a Hegelian-Marxist manner – the general content, thus delivering a new, updated and situated discursive field. This understanding allows us a twofold, dialectical notion of both the structure and content: an inescapability of the moral dimension embedded at the core of Marx's project – which I will analyse here in relation to Horkheimer's critique – and its outcome as a different morality, which emerges as a negative moral and ethical (new) field of concern for specific points, produced without necessarily being recognised or described as such. In this way, we can see how Horkheimer presented the moral field, in its inherently Kantian aspect, as preserved in elements of its form and structure, in which its accustomed (bourgeois and traditional) content was discarded and replaced by specific spatio-temporal and socially situated materialist concerns. After the Kantian turn, however, the Hegelian

---

<sup>11</sup> Max Horkheimer, "Postscript," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1975), 249.

revolt against the limitations, flaws, and rigidities of that system showed us how the notion of continuous movement and historical progress was an insufficient reason for a complete denial of a function of our understanding of the works of our mind.

The problem of the mind and the subjective, as it is understood in the field of Freudian psychology, brings with it the notion of ideology and reification that had so troubled Horkheimer (and Adorno). Both had to grapple with the task of producing a new field of specific critical theory based on materialist paradigms and a critique of what is and what is not morality or metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the question of ideology is one of the great challenges involving morality and ethics, as they are very susceptible to manipulation and instrumentalisation. It is therefore relevant for this study to examine what Horkheimer's close adherence to the Marxist abolition of morality entailed, in order to find out to what extent he was able to fulfil the ideal of the task, or if, on the contrary, he – like Hegel and Marx before him – had to revert, albeit partially, to the system of the Copernican turn in order to make it possible. The issues of normativity and the role of value judgement are relevant here, for without them it would not even have been possible to address the case at hand. A value judgement is part of the process of judging, and judging is both a subjective mental property that is reproduced as a social activity with its roots (for the Protestant West) in the history of law and religion, to later become an essential part of the development of science. Horkheimer defence of materialism shows that

Even exchange value in the economy is not based on free valuation but rather ensues from the life process of society, in which use values are determining factors. The undialectical concept of the free subject is foreign to materialism. It is also well aware of its own conditionality. Apart from

---

<sup>12</sup> "Autonomously attempting to decide whether one's actions are good or evil is plainly a late historical phenomenon. A highly developed European individual is not only able to bring important decisions into the light of clear consciousness and morally evaluate them – such individuals also have this capacity in regard to most of the primarily instinctual and habitual reactions that make up the bulk of their lives... As the principle of authority was undermined and a significant number of individuals acquired substantial decision-making power over the conduct of their lives, the need emerged for a spiritual guideline that could substitute for this principle's eroding bases in orienting the individual in this world. The acquisition of moral principles was important for members of the higher social strata, since their position constantly demanded that they make intervening decisions which they had earlier been absolved of by authority. At the same time, a rationally grounded morality became all the more necessary to dominate the masses in the state when a mode of action diverging from the their life interests was demanded of them." Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, ed. G. Frederick Hunter et al., Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 15–6.

personal nuances, this latter is to be sought in connection with those forces which are devoted to the realization of the aims stated above. Because materialist science never takes its eyes away from these aims, it does not assume the character of false impartiality, but is consciously biased.<sup>13</sup>

There is a relationship and a tension between the personal subjective capacity for thought and judgement and the socially constructed form, and this was the concern of Kant, Hegel, Marx and Horkheimer.<sup>14</sup> In effect, what is evident in Horkheimer's work is the explicit negation of morality and morals as simultaneously (dialectically?) conflated while the argument continues to maintain and sustain at the core of its discourse against morality a series of moral imperatives and practical oughts. This reproduces (smuggles back?) the Kantian categorical imperative and the value judgement that haunts Marxist critique.<sup>15</sup> An example of the way in which morality is dialectically rejected is this paragraph from Horkheimer's essay,

The structure of needs in various forms of society, in particular social groups, and in individuals is changeable and can be explained only in relation to a specific time and a concrete situation. The known and unknown devotees of the materialist outlook have for centuries given up their freedom and their lives in the struggle for the most varied goals, but especially in solidarity with suffering men. They prove that a concern for personal physical well-being is no more closely associated with this kind of thinking than with any other. In rejecting the illusions of idealist metaphysics, they have surrendered every hope of an individual reward in eternity and, with it, an important selfish motive operative in other men. Repeated attempts to interpret such selfless dedication to the causes of humanity as a contradiction to materialist convictions lack every philosophical justification. What leads to such misunderstandings is the simplistic psychology which lies behind most doctrines that profess an absolute morality.<sup>16</sup>

Horkheimer's reflections above play with the inescapability of the

<sup>13</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 46–7.

<sup>14</sup> "Within the soul, a struggle is played out between personal interest and a vague conception of the general interest, between individual and universal objectives. Yet it remains obscure how a rational decision based upon criteria is possible between the two. There arise an endless reflection and constant turmoil which are fundamentally impossible to overcome. Since this problematic tension playing itself out in the inner lives of human beings necessarily derives from their role in the social life process, Kant's philosophy, being a faithful reflection of this tension, is a consummate expression of its age. The basis of the spiritual situation in question is easily recognized upon consideration of the structure of the bourgeois order. (...)" Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 19.

<sup>15</sup> James Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant: A Marxist Critique of Kant's Ethics*, Historical Materialism Book Series 271 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023), 98–103.

<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York, NY: Continuum, 1933), 44.

moral (and ethical) constitutive elements of the subject of man, understood as a species being, as Marx had it, in general, and in particular in its progressive inescapability in relation to the exercise of a critical theory associated with the Marxist standpoint and materialist methodology.

In this sense, to understand that to criticise what configures a so-called "wrong world" is in itself a moral act involving a value judgement, even if it is a fully committed and profound exercise of a critique of morality, morals and moralising as bourgeois instruments. Since its predicate is the "wrong" of the world, this judgement (of being wrong) takes us back to the Kantian judgement and the Hegelian and Marxian disputes. And therefore to ask whether those inherited Kantian orientations between ethics and law, which the Marxists had taken up after Hegel's rejection of Kant's morality, had brought into their core forms a kind of systematic moral versus a moral glitch. Furthermore, it can be frankly said that it is not possible to see how an emancipatory and systemic social revolution could come into being and realise its project without its own set of categorical imperatives, its ideas of values and norms; of what it stands for and against, of what it has changed and wants to change, regulate or legislate for. We do not mean by this the Kantian afterthought of what the revolution does once it has won its place as a new institution, but the moral imperatives against slavery or class division and subjugation that have driven such revolutions. Perhaps here the return to a closely studied aspect of Kant's philosophy can be understood as a necessary step for the researcher.<sup>17</sup> What we are suggesting here on the question of morality is that Marxist theorists – including Marx himself and critical theorists such as Horkheimer – had developed a negative dialectical position, influenced by Hegel, on morality along with ethics, without being able to properly remove the moral categorical imperatives from their propositions or systems.<sup>18</sup>

This dependency must be something that can be explored in materialist terms, i.e. without falling into an idealist, pre-Marxist discourse on

<sup>17</sup> See Lea Ypi, "On Revolution in Kant and Marx," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (June 2014): 262–87. Ypi brings forth a relevant question about the subject of Revolution and its theoretical support in Kant, albeit perhaps in certain cryptic modes due to censorship, and offers a comment of the Kantian standpoint that refreshes our general assumptions on the subject of the conservatism of Kant.

<sup>18</sup> Horkheimer: "Due to the lack of rational organization of the social whole which his labor benefits, he cannot recognize himself in his true connection to it and knows himself only as an individual whom the whole affects somewhat, without it ever becoming clear how much and in what manner his egoistic activity actually affects it. The whole thus appears as an admonition and demand which troubles precisely the progressive individuals at their labor, both in the call of conscience and in moral deliberation." Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 20.

morals. One example between many of the cases rests in Horkheimer's "Materialism and Metaphysics": "The various materialist doctrines, therefore, are not examples of a stable and permanent idea. The economic theory of society and history arose not out of purely theoretical motives, but out of the need to comprehend contemporary society. For this society has reached the point where it excludes an ever larger number of men from the happiness made possible by the widespread abundance of economic forces."<sup>19</sup> The fact that these categorical imperatives are thus most intensely perceived by all the amoral theorists of the liberal and neo-liberal projects, including those embracing Fascism and Nazism, contributes to their prosecutorial denunciation of the constraining and rigid moralist mission of the projects of socialism and communism. It serves the fascist pseudo-revolutionary discourses of liberation and total freedom from the so-called leftist state authoritarianism that is so familiar and omnipresent in both fascist and neoliberal discourses today. Morality, which was and is, so rejected in Marxist theory, thus appears as the return of the repressed; as a visible sign of weakness in the project of the Left, while its own possibilities for struggle in the field of ideology (and morality) are, as it were, denied by its own logical will to a no-moral, i.e. amoral, position.

## 2. The Form of the Research

In this study, I will examine how these specific legacies and critical tensions concerning morality, morals and ethics mentioned in the introduction above came into play in Horkheimer's critique of morality and metaphysics in the context of the project of the early Frankfurt School. I will also consider the inherent dichotomy of form and content – and its complicated aspects – at play in his materialist critique of morality. The questions posed in this essay are negative, as we reflect on a lack and an explicit negation – the disavowal of morality – that has followed the Hegelian transformation of morality into Ethical Life. For these purposes, I have engaged mainly with two other authors: James Furner, who proposes rescuing autonomy from Kant for further Marxist methodologies that include ethics, and Gillian Rose, whose critique of Adorno and the Frankfurt School gives us insights into navigating these inherent problematics of morality and ethics from both her work on Adorno and Hegel. In *The Melancholy Science*, British philosopher Gillian Rose argues that Adorno's critique of morality takes the standpoint of the critical

---

<sup>19</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," 45.

moralist and shows how, for Adorno, morality thus becomes form, or what she, following Adorno, terms as style.<sup>20</sup>

My approach to the tensions latent in the Marxist abolition of morality owes much to Gillian Rose's approach to dealing with antinomies in her promotion of the Hegelian speculative standpoint and addressing the intrinsic conceptual difficulty she posits in the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*.<sup>21</sup> This research follows an initial incursion into the topic in the series of seminars given as part of the Critical Theory Working Group's explorations of the early IfS. What interests me is examining how Horkheimer established the conceptual parameters for a Critical Theory capable of fulfilling its task (understood as the generation of new critical methodologies, also as a praxis) as necessarily existing within and against a "wrong world." It is precisely this specific motivational standpoint – the struggle against the "wrong world" – that the Institute for Social Research saw as a moral (social) imperative.<sup>22</sup>

The anti-moral critique mobilised by neo-liberal discourses and their anarcho-libertarian appeal to a fully abstracted and all-embracing concept of freedom (for the liberation of markets and the crushing of the welfare state against what they see as the unjustly repressive application of human rights) has been the subject of particularly clarifying Marxist critiques, such as Jessica White's *The Morals of the Market*.<sup>23</sup> In White's work, figures like Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and Friedrich Hayek – among others – are exposed for what they are: moralist anti-moralists. However, the anti-moral attitude can be better understood in retrospect because the actors against morality (or metaphysics) have to be very clear about their position as Marxist materialists and not libertarians or anarcho-capitalists. Moreover, the will to critique (based

<sup>20</sup> Rose uses the specific title from one of Adorno's passages in *Minima Moralia*, named "Morals and Style," as the header of one of her chapters to situate the 'moral' tensions of content and form that are implied in the philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno. This particular case illustrates the point of relevancy to the question of the unavoidable escape from morals and the even more unavoidable need to recur to moral systems to help the task of a critique of specific morals involved in the repression and self-control of the subject in the capitalist totality.

<sup>21</sup> See also Rose's remarks on the difficulties of morality and value in Neo-Kantianism. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Verso, 2009), 8.

<sup>22</sup> For the architects of the neoliberal world view such as Ludwig von Mises, though not exclusively, socialism constituted a moral imperative. See Ludwig von Mises's work *Socialism*, where he dedicates much space to destroying the notion that Marx and subsequent Marxists got rid of morals and the ethical. Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism, An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, 6th ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1981), particularly chapter 4.

<sup>23</sup> Whyte, *The Morals of the Market*.

on the concept of immanent critique) on the left and from a Marxist materialist standpoint is a very specific, concrete kind of will, one not without its own dialectical problems. A key point of the commitment to immanent critique is to see critical thinking and writing as part of a (potentially political) praxis.<sup>24</sup><sup>25</sup> One should be able to distinguish a series of elements and conditions both necessary and sufficient to make a critique of the social, political, juridical, and economic from a distinct standpoint on the left. This critique is connected to the process of a philosophy that enters into new domains – situated in concrete historical time and a specific social context – a philosophy defined by the IfS and Max Horkheimer as Critical Theory.

James Furner's work *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant: A Marxist Critique of Kant's Ethics* elaborates that there are a series of theses inherent in the Marxist rejection of morals, which he unfolds across four theses and three parts intending to defend "a new way of thinking about the relation of Marx's project to Kant's ethics."<sup>26</sup> In the first part of his book, he explores these propositions through a series of key arguments and the conceptual reasons for their rejection of Kantian ethics as either irrelevant, complementary, or incompatible. One issue that will be argued below is the possibility of a concept that supports negative morality

<sup>24</sup> This relates directly to Karl Marx's statement: "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself. The evident proof of the radicalism of German theory, and hence of its practical energy, is that it proceeds from a resolute *positive* abolition of religion." Marx and Engels, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," in *Marx and Engels: 1843–44*, Collected Works 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 175–88.

<sup>25</sup> Horkheimer argues that critical theory is based on 'right willing' as much as right thinking in the "Truth" essay from the ZfS, and that the importance of the will is what ties together the 'critical attitude' at the end of "Traditional and Critical Theory." In "On the Problem of Truth," Horkheimer says: "The correction and further definition of the truth is not taken care of by History, so that all the cognizant subject has to do is passively observe, conscious that even his particular truth, which contains the others negated in it, is not the whole. Rather, the truth is advanced because the human beings who possess it stand by it unbendingly, apply it and carry it through, act according to it, and bring it to power against the resistance of reactionary, narrow, one-sided points of view. The process of cognition includes real historical will and action just as much as it does learning from experience and intellectual comprehension. The latter cannot progress without the former." Horkheimer, "On the Problem of Truth," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, ed. G. Frederick Hunter et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 193.

<sup>26</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 114.

and/or a kind of moral judgement that is in itself a revolutionising of the Kantian moral judgement (as modified by Marx). The idea is that ethics belongs to a moral form in itself, which was developed especially in the work of Hegel. However, something is produced with Marx's critique of Hegel that appears as a relapse into Kantian forms, even if it competes with their aims. It mobilises the categorical imperative in full view.

On one of the various accounts of Marx's own use of the categorical imperative, Furner quotes Marx's introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* to illustrate Marx's use of the categorical imperative: "[t]he critique of religion culminates in the doctrine that the human being is the supreme being for the human being, and thus with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which the human being is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable being."<sup>27</sup> In this statement from Marx – which is not the only one of this type – it is possible to grasp why Furner's emphasis is on Marx's formal dependence on the Kantian categorical imperative, even if, as Furner suggests, it is only "partly" mobilised by Marx to "rival" Kant's scientific and critical-philosophical notions. Furthermore, it is relevant here to consider the conceptual and methodological process at work in Marx's production of this rivalry with Kantian formulations. For Furner, "Marx is significant in his suggestion of a post-Kantian ethics, in which autonomy is located at the level of a human community."<sup>28</sup> This claim is examined closely in Furner's study where he posits how a Marxist critique of Kant's ethics is based on two steps or arguments.<sup>29</sup> One is the argument against Kant's involvement with religion, and thus, "subject to a critique of religion [of how] our application of Kant's formulas of the categorical imperative relies on a belief in the existence of God, but [of how, and precisely] Kant offers us "no good reason" to believe in God's existence."<sup>30</sup> Kant's God is effectively displaced

<sup>27</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 114.

<sup>28</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> This is how Furner presents the case which we mentioned above: "If Marx has a conception of freedom as the autonomy of a human community, then Marx is committed to a critique of Kant's ethics. A conception of freedom as the autonomy of a human community is a rival conception of autonomy to that of Kant. [...] As human beings are interdependent, needy beings with capacities that we can develop, no account of what we are required to obey can omit the fact of our social dynamics. [...] This conception of self-regulative human community entails a critique of Kant's ethics, as Kant does not locate autonomy at the community level, or restrict it to human beings." Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 112.

<sup>30</sup> That "Kant does not offer a good (moral or practical) reason for believing that God exists should already tell us something about Kant's use of the figure of God as

by a personal, individualised but socially binding morality, in a “non-timeless grounding argument for the value of the autonomy of a human community.”<sup>31</sup> For which the key point at work will be that “ethical principles based on this value must be shown to be able to condemn what is wrong with capitalism and to recommend socialism, without relying on any unjustified religious belief.”<sup>32</sup>/<sup>33</sup>

The case of the Kantian disavowal of “autonomy at the level of the community” is key to this study. One question is how the isolated subject, which Kant presents as part of a community of equals in his imperative not to treat the other as a means, can be transformed into a fully conforming community, which he seems to deny. This tension within the Hegelian “I that is we” contained in Marx’s critique of Kant can be revisited here to understand how the subject in Kant is not understood as solitary or separate from society. If we closely read the passage from Furner quoted above, we find how Marx’s critique of Kant’s ethics – based on freedom as the autonomy of a human community – is deployed as a “rival” conception of autonomy to the individualistic concept of Kant. For us, this conceptual situation opens at the same time to the possibility that such a quality, viz. being a “rival,” does not necessarily have to imply one-sided opposition; rather, it becomes closer to a perfected form of dialectical sublation. Thus we can see, in one way or another, how Marx’s “mischievous”<sup>34</sup> use of the Kantian ethical system left his disciples to grapple with all sorts of contradictions and paradoxes insidiously encrusted at the core of their discourses. Furner exposes these implicit tensions occurring in other Marxist authors:

To reconcile the idea that Marx’s is similar to that of Kant’s, in viewing freedom as autonomy, with the thought that Marx condemns capitalism at the system-level and in terms of community, Feenberg would have to reject the claim that Marx viewed autonomy a quality of a ‘rational individual’, in favour of the idea of self-legislative human community. Marx’s commitment to autonomy could then be thought to align with his concept of social revolution.<sup>35</sup>

In a sense, Furner’s study ends up implying that the question of ethics for Marxist theorists (and this will include Marxists such as Horkheimer)

replacing a Greek Logos.” Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 116.

<sup>32</sup> Emphasis mine. Here one can see the reverberation with Horkheimer’s idea for the necessity of Critical Theory for and about a “wrong world.” The concept and statement of the wrong world is in itself a moral injunction.

<sup>33</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 116.

<sup>34</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 114.

is still unresolved and relevant today.

The famous categorical imperative set out in Marx's introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* is, as Furner notes, "remarkable." Furner argues that the comment is so "remarkable" precisely because Marx invokes "a concept coined by Kant, the 'categorical imperative', in the introduction to critique aimed at Hegel – aimed, indeed, at the very text in which Hegel describes Kant's ethics as an empty formalism." He goes on to state that this "should give pause to the kind of hand-waving that insists that Marxism cannot take anything from Kant's ethics because Marx regarded Hegel as having exposed its empty formalism."<sup>36</sup> Following an interrogation of Marx's arguments, Furner sees that Marx's "declaration commits him to a post-Kantian conception of autonomy, on which the subject of autonomy is a subject from which defective relations can be thought of as expunged: a human community."<sup>37</sup> Here placing the indissociable nature of morals and ethics (normativity) from the political subject as core for political praxis—not as cause-effect but implied in a kind of Hegelian movement, or, to put it more radically, as a kind of mischievous Marxist move.

### 3. Horkheimer's Hegelian Mystifications?

The very possibility that Hegel's thought was mystified by Horkheimer is relevant here because it is that of an effective disremption and separation (by making an artificial distinction between system and method) of what we might otherwise understand as a sublation of methodologies. Gillian Rose situates the discrepancies related to moral methodologies originally found in Adorno, which are useful for assigning a parallel case for our concern with Horkheimer and the case of the mystification of Hegel:

"On the whole, both non-Marxist and Marxist sociology have mystified Hegel's thought. [...] Marxist sociology has mystified Hegel by making a distinction between a 'radical method' and a 'conservative system'. As a result of this artificial distinction, the centrality of those ideas which Hegel developed to unify the theoretical and practical philosophy of Kant and Fichte has been obscured."<sup>38</sup>

Rose also makes a very significant point about how, "in their very different ways, both the non-Marxist and the Marxist critiques of Hegel [had attempted] to drop the notion of the 'absolute', but, at the same

---

<sup>36</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 114.

<sup>37</sup> Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 44–5.

time, [had unavoidably retained] the social import of Hegel's thought." And how, "in the case of Marxism, the attempt depends on extracting a 'method' whose use will reveal social contradictions."<sup>39</sup> The descriptions of the adjacent problematics that the sociologists will pose within their new methods and logic between their *sui generis* uses of Kant, Hegel, or Marx, some conservative and others more radical, support the possibility that the project of Horkheimer and his negation of morality will conform to this trend and show a tendency to mystify Hegel, but also a dependency on Kant. Rose argues that this mystification of Hegel produces an unreflected negation of morality and ethics in Adorno's (and, for the purposes of this discussion, in Horkheimer's) early period. In other words, these projects were firmly rooted in morality and ethics, even as they diverged from Kant's philosophy by embracing the Marxist-Hegelian movement or, in some cases, by concealing their genuine communist (ethical-moral) perspectives. The early essays of the IfS thus appear to subsume Marx's self-negated or "mischiefous" Kantian rationale deployed against morality. Consequently, morality is separated from their project, which must not only be criticised but also slashed (dirempted) from scientific materialism. This separation is evident in the content and intent, but not the form, of their works and essays.

However, for us, the aim to place morality as judgement and value-determining reason at the core of the critical activity of Marxism, and of the IfS's proposed project of Marxist critical theory, is not equivalent to reinstating the conventional understanding of moralising. The objective is to rethink the function of moral value judgement as a human element of a form of sensual evaluation that transcends the context of its instrumentalisation by the bourgeoisie. As this is a case of identifying (as forensics of) ethics in Marx and consequently in Horkheimer, we will only highlight some indicative paradoxes and cite some of the arguments that can prompt further questions and studies on the potential existence of a negated yet existing moral foundation for Marxism. In order to achieve this we will examine how Horkheimer employs a dialectical and critical approach to contrasting and comparing different concepts, applying the principles of historical materialism to investigate the differences between metaphysics and materialism, and between morals and materialism.

I will start here with Adorno as a preliminary for approaching Horkheimer. In *The Melancholy Science* – specifically the chapter "Morality and Style," which outlines Rose's vision of Adorno's crypto-morals – Rose states that Adorno "shared Nietzsche's programme of a 'transval-

---

<sup>39</sup> Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 45.

uation of all values,' " and that, for Adorno, " 'Morality', 'values' and 'norms' do not imply a moral dimension distinct from other dimensions but characterise the construction and imposition of 'reality.' "⁴⁰ Thus, Adorno was at this level in a position like Nietzsche's and was ultimately, in Rose's words, "a moralist, concerned to find a method by which his alternative moral perspective could be conveyed, but he faces the difficulties of justifying a moral position when he has apparently rejected all morality, of stating that position when he has rejected the prevalent norms of communication, and of adhering to any position at all without reaffirming the superior status of static as opposed to dynamic ways of thinking."<sup>41</sup> We can see with the help of Rose's interpretation that Adorno wanted to form an "alternative moral perspective." Without conflating Adorno and Rose with Horkheimer (and Marx), I would like to place the former very close to the case of the latter, as two authors who also addressed the question of their own (inherently bourgeois) moral perception and imperatives, and took the necessary steps to be transformed into alternative (new and negative forms of) moral perspectives. This can be proposed in a 'constellating' form à la Adorno, since it does not have recourse to any formal proposing of a philosophy or system for an "alternative moral perspective" for its thesis, but merely finds in the aim of conveying such alternatives the intrinsic necessity implied in a critique of morality and ethics that we find in Horkheimer. Rose explains Adorno's stance on morality with reference to Nietzsche: "Nietzsche called one of his books by the provocative title *Beyond Good and Evil*, but its theme is 'the conscience of method'. [Similarly] *Minima Moralia* is preoccupied with 'the morality of thinking' and with 'morality and style.' "<sup>42</sup> If we consider the interpretation put forth by Rose, we find that in Adorno's *Minima Moralia* :

The morality of thought lies in a procedure that is neither entrenched nor detached, neither blind nor empty, neither atomistic nor consequential. The double-edged method which has earned Hegel's Phenomenology the reputation among reasonable people of unfathomable difficulty, that is, its simultaneous demands that phenomena be allowed to speak as such – in a 'pure looking-on' – and yet that their relation to consciousness as the subject, reflection, be at every moment maintained, expresses this morality most directly and in all its depth of contradiction. But how much more difficult has it become to conform to such morality now that it is no longer possible to convince oneself of the identity of subject and object, the ultimate assumption of which still enabled Hegel to conceal the antagonistic demands of observation and interpretation.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 25.

<sup>41</sup> Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 25–6.

<sup>42</sup> Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 26.

<sup>43</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, Radical Thinkers 1

Rose observes a series of inherent antinomies between value judgements and judgements of fact and, identifying (the/or a) problem of diremption in classical sociology, concludes that, "any sociology which separates judgements of fact from judgements of value is bound to be inconsistent."<sup>44</sup> She further explains that "Adorno's point [in his critique of sociology] is not that these judgements are inseparable" but "that the very question of their separability or inseparability is illegitimate."<sup>45</sup> This error is caused by what Rose (with Adorno) defines as "identity thinking", i.e. "the claim to truth and the rejection of untruth of the simple logical judgement is already constituted in the procedure which the cliché allots to values separate from their base."<sup>46</sup> Non-identity thinking, on the other hand, "is not a separable form of evaluation but 'a concrete process of cognition where what is decided by the confrontation of the thing with what it claims to be according to its concept, is thus decided by immanent criticism.'"<sup>47</sup> A relationality of problematics exists, which informs, causes or modifies one another under interpretation. This relationality appears as a subject to be considered when examining Horkheimer's approach to morals.

#### **4. Horkheimer's Negative (Moral) Critique Contra the Wrong World**

So far, we have situated the case and the questions that affect the issue of bourgeois morality, both in their scientific and philosophical-critical background, along with the notions and assumed conclusions and judgments on the issue of ethics and morality. Focusing on the specific case of Horkheimer, the sources and insights that triggered the idea of the paradox inherent in the critique of morality in the younger Horkheimer's materialist social research will be unfolded. First, a series of important passages will be introduced that work in relation to those by Adorno cited above and to Horkheimer's self versus his statements in the two essays that will be presented later.

In Horkheimer's case, the texts used here belong to different temporalities, and could indeed be the outcome of a process, even of a regression in his thinking. In any case, they provide interesting comparative material to help us make our case. Horkheimer was acutely aware of the

---

(London and New York: Verso, 2005), 46.

<sup>44</sup> Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 107.

<sup>45</sup> Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, quoted in Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 107.

<sup>47</sup> Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 107.

problem that being openly moralistic would bring to a practising Marxist. In the fragment "Change of Thought" from *Dämmerung* (written 1926-1931), Horkheimer states that,

Among Marxist thinkers, the avowal of moral motives, particularly compassion which is the secret mainspring of their thought and action, is looked down upon, not only because they are ashamed of it but also because it has been their experience that such a confession usually becomes a substitute for practice. Consciously or not, they assume that the moral impulse either manifests itself in actions or in words. That is the reason they mistrust the latter.<sup>48</sup>

Here Horkheimer makes it clear that for the Marxist the profession of moral motives, especially compassion, is looked down upon. He states clearly, however, that "compassion is the secret mainspring of Marxist thought and action;" and thereby brings to us the substantiation of what has always been suspected: Marxism implies a morally and ethically grounded standpoint strongly linked to both social compassion and outrage, which, as an affect, draw the subject to a not (merely) selfish solidarity in its implicit social empathy. It is particularly useful to look at its negation when considering how compassion is derided in bourgeois ethics. This theme was more fully explored in the second "Excursus" chapter of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a chapter which was written by Horkheimer.<sup>49</sup>

As we see, the case for "moral motives" as the "secret mainspring of [Marxist] thought and action, [which] is looked down upon, not only because [Marxists] are ashamed of it but also because it has been their experience that such a confession usually becomes a substitute for practice" facilitates an understanding of why, even for Horkheimer, declaring himself susceptible to morals was not considered desirable at the time when he was pushing for a Marxist methodology embedded in his project for the Institute of Social Research. It also shows why for Marx and Marxists after him, theory became categorically separated from praxis, and words in themselves became a source of mistrust.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Max Horkheimer, "Change of Thought," in *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969*, trans. Michael Shaw, A Continuum Book (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 34–5.

<sup>49</sup> Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, editor's afterword to Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 219–24, specifically 221–2.

<sup>50</sup> One text that may assist in understanding the evolution of Marx's perspective towards a skepticism of words within the confines of theoretical and philosophical abstraction is Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005). Löwy elucidates how, for Marx, the issue was not that theory was erroneous, but rather that the preceding theses regarding the advent of socialism had to be sustained

This can also be grasped more deeply in the issues that we know to be relevant to the implications of the disavowal of morality in Marx and Marxists, as they were for Horkheimer:

When it is emphasized that there are needs and qualities other than hunger and power they point to sober reality where everything turns on the satisfaction of the most primitive needs. In so doing, they tend to transform the bitterness in that comment into an apology. Under such circumstances, the assertion that in today's reality the ideal merely serves as ideological camouflage for a bad materialistic practice easily turns into the realism of certain journalists and reporters: "Don't bother us with culture. We know that that's a hoax."<sup>51</sup>

A closer examination of these particular descriptions in Horkheimer's work reveals a series of statements that illustrate the tensions and contradictions inherent in the form and methodology of a Marxist critique of morality.

The fragment "Skepsis and Morality" shows a dynamic in which moral imperatives are mobilised by the subject who is against morals, i.e. Horkheimer. This appears in a critical and negative sense, as the unavoidable appeal to an 'ought' to that which is clearly explained here: "But when it is said that Marx and Engels did not "prove" socialism, not pessimism but the commitment to practice which theory needs, will follow."<sup>52</sup> It is unclear if Horkheimer is citing directly from Marx here or if he is making an interpretation of what Marx had once stated, as he does not attribute the sentence "commitment to practice which theory needs" to Marx; however, we can observe how this claim to a theory that needs practice – instead of a theory that should be collapsed into practice – conveys a less divided, less bipolar understanding of what constitutes the Marxist position: the phrase "commitment to practice" manifests as arguing for the separation of practice from theory, and in the following words, such separation is repaired, with "practice which

in a simultaneous and dialectical manner. With the rise of Stalin and other more radical tenets within Marxist thought, this inherent tension and adherence to the theoretical aspect within praxis was effectively nullified.

<sup>51</sup> Horkheimer, "Change of Thought," 35.

<sup>52</sup> This passage is preceded by a description of how Marx is recuperated by academia: "One has to fight for socialism, in other words. The hedged approbation of Marxist theory, its respectful integration in the history of philosophy, is something the bourgeoisie likes to see. The correlate of this contemplative treatment of Marxism in real life is the accommodation to things as they are. To say that socialism does not "follow" from Marxist theory even though socialism is desirable, and to add nothing further, is to scientifically and morally justify capitalism. It is an expression of social skepticism." Horkheimer, "Skepsis and Morality," in *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969*, trans. Michael Shaw, A Continuum Book (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 36.

theory needs" – both propositions become 'mischievously' relational.<sup>53</sup>

Horkheimer further expands on the connection or bipolarity implied in the position of scepticism versus morality; his remarks are worth quoting at length:

What the transition from one part of a system to another is for the bourgeois scholar, a "problem" like so many others, something to which "justice can be done" on a few sympathetic pages in a textbook, i.e., the resolution of the question whether class society continues or is successfully replaced by socialism, is something that will decide if mankind progresses or perishes in barbarism. The position a person takes here not only determines the relationship of his life to that of mankind but also the degree of his morality. A philosophical system, an ethic, a moral teaching which merely treats our outdated, progress-inhibiting property relations, the existence of a class society and the need to transcend it as "part of a larger picture" rather than identifying itself with that need is the opposite of morality, for the form morality has taken in our time is the implementation of socialism. [...] [Bourgeois professors and literari] calmly look on the legal rape of countless children, women and men in capitalist societies and even more in their colonies, and ingest their share of the loot.<sup>54</sup>

What the core of the paragraph above reveals is not a mere digression, but a defining assertion, namely that "the form morality has taken in our time is the implementation of socialism." If this was written between 1926 and 1931, what do we make of the "form" of morality that implied the socialist project? As we know, following Rolf Wiggershaus, in the 20s and 30s the proposal of a new interdisciplinary methodology such as that of sociology, especially when based on Marxist curricula, was practically and materially considered to be socialist.<sup>55</sup>

In the fragment "Two Aspects of Materialism," we can find the left-wing, critical Marxist moral perspective by looking at some of its imperatives: "Tolerance – since everything has to be the way it is – protest against everything being the way it has to be."<sup>56</sup> To gain further insight into Horkheimer's perspective, it is useful to examine a number of significant preliminary critiques that can be found in both the 1968 preface to the volume *Critical Theory* and his short 1932 essay "Notes on Science

<sup>53</sup> The phrase "practice which theory needs..." is probably an allusion to the works of the young Marx. For a work which summarises the young Marx's philosophy and thereby confirms this similarity with Horkheimer, see Löwy's aforementioned *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, 10-13.

<sup>54</sup> Horkheimer, "Skepsis and Morality," 36-7.

<sup>55</sup> Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson, repr. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 15 et passim..

<sup>56</sup> Horkheimer, "Two Aspects of Materialism," in *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw, A Continuum Book (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 139.

and The Crisis.”<sup>57</sup> As he lets us know in the retrospective 1968 preface, “metaphysical pessimism, always an implicit element in every genuine materialist philosophy, had always been congenial to [him].”<sup>58</sup> We may continue this look into Horkheimer’s moral perspective as it relates to metaphysics by considering his lament over the field’s neglect of temporally situated social facts: “Metaphysics thereby turned its back on the causes of the social crisis and even downgraded the means of investigating it. It introduced a new confusion of its own by hypostatizing isolated, abstractly conceived man and thereby belittling the importance of a theoretical comprehension of social processes.”<sup>59</sup> Here we can observe how metaphysics is negatively interpellated by a moral (critical admonition) for what it has positively betrayed. But metaphysics is not a person or a subject, it is a field and also a state of being, and as such it is represented by its proponents. Metaphysics is, in principle, open to all of us; it is a way of perceiving and sensing. Thus metaphysics, as it stands accused, is represented only by those metaphysicians who, by virtue of their ideological alliances, have betrayed their responsibility to come to terms with the social crisis. This situation may or may not have lasted, and it may very well be that at some point in our history, a series of new metaphysics will intensify the commitment to the social to levels not yet seen in Horkheimer’s time. In “Materialism and Metaphysics,” Horkheimer explores the broader problem of the subsumption of the sciences and philosophy by ideology. The following paragraphs make the problem very clear and allow us to easily decipher it today as the prototypical neoliberal ethos:

The idea of unbroken harmony between reality and reason belongs to the liberalist phase. It corresponds to a social economy marked by a plurality of individual entrepreneurs. The image of their interests as harmonizing and producing a frictionless functioning of the whole economy was applied to society as a whole and its various social classes. The monopolistic phase goes even further in denying class conflicts, but the struggle in the world market between a few power groups has become so much the principal theme of the period that instead of harmony between individuals, such concepts as tragedy, heroism, and destiny have come to be the main categories for a philosophy of history. The material interests of individuals are considered unimportant, something less to be fulfilled than to be overcome.<sup>60</sup>

Exactly as it is criticised and exposed by Horkheimer here, we can

<sup>57</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1975), 3–9.

<sup>58</sup> Horkheimer, preface to *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1975), ix.

<sup>59</sup> Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” 7.

<sup>60</sup> Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” 12–3.

find a resonance in the critique of neoliberal morals proposed by Jessica Whyte in *The Morals of the Market*, where she makes clear the connection between these philosophies of human harmony and manifest destiny as an alibi for the neoliberals' ability to get away with the criminal aspect of their policies.<sup>61</sup>

The case that Horkheimer makes against metaphysics is a critique of its idealisation of and bias towards figures of authority based on their longevity and the greatness of the past. It is not explicitly stated, but the authors and tendencies criticised in his essay may be the conservative, perennial values we tend to see in academia. In Horkheimer's essays, a very present and saturated signifier of what morality means is at work, and it is accused of being a mere by-product of bourgeois thought. However, this is difficult to assess without looking at the possible origins of these misrecognition, displacements, and self-obscurations in relation to the interpretation of morality. If we consider the general arguments put forth by Neo-Kantian socialists such as Herman Cohen, we can discern how they appear to originate in Hegel's critique of Kant's concept of the divided subject and its principles of non-contradiction, which were subsequently adopted by Marx and other Marxists. For us, morality is not just a set of rigid bourgeois conventions. Morality since Kant, however complicated by Hegel's critique, involves the possibility of conflicting discourses and principles in different senses and contains the possibility of activating emancipation, revolution, and social change for the 'best.' However, this is not a majoritarian view of morality, especially among Marxist theorists. In the contemporary globalised society, 'morality' has transcended its traditional field of explicit value judgements to include the kind of position that rejects value judgements.

This brings us back to the question of the materialist rejection of value judgements and the autonomous subject of subjectivity, which in any case tells us that the so-called moral sciences, implicit in what should or should not be accepted as right or good, are never one-sided or even double-sided. Returning to Freud's work here is necessary, especially to his treatment of negation and denial in "Die Verneinung," where the processes by which the analysand's dogged subjectivity is committed to negating what is otherwise obvious for the therapist and

---

<sup>61</sup> Whyte offers a great study for reflecting on the double morality waged by the neoliberals since their origins. Her study provides us with a comparative material of how morals and rights are used perversely by the neoliberal rhetoric. It also hints at the idea of how Marxism by having disavowed morality and ethics, found itself dry, for arguments to oppose those morals of the market, as it was easily accused of mere totalitarianism.

analyst.<sup>62</sup> This means that by insisting on the separation and negation of morality, Horkheimer's attitude of "no, I am not a moralist, no, I am not interested in morality, and no, morality is wrong and materialism is right," reproduces the same mechanisms exposed in Freud's seminal text.

## 5. The Divided Morals of Critical Theory

Horkheimer declares his Hegelianism by making clear that the problem with theory is separation, compartmentalisation, and abstractedness and its telling parallelism to the "empty form of philosophy" characteristic of positivism. As he states, "Hegel himself [...] did not separate truth and knowledge from the temporal; on the contrary—and this is the secret of his depth of thought—he made knowledge of the temporal as temporal the content of philosophy."<sup>63</sup> In this instance, we may discern the integration of Hegel's elemental shift towards the unity of space and time within the Marxian perspective. This enables the realisation of a historical understanding that is not an abstraction but rather situated within the concrete dimensions of actuality and social contextualisation.

This section will examine how Horkheimer employs the Hegelian technique of presenting historically situated accounts of social phenomena in order to elucidate his own materialist perspective. A core value judgement related to the present, which represents the Hegelian actuality and unity of space and time for Horkheimer, is his statement on his negative standpoint, "I can say what is wrong, but I cannot say what is right." This dictum demonstrates that a value judgement ("what is wrong") carries within it the *raison d'être* of the Marxist methodologies that form part of Critical Theory. This precise locating of a 'here and now' or a 'then and there' described as "wrong" appears as a moral imperative for an autonomous mode of action.

The modern break from the religious mode of authority and the production of a self-regulating subject of a higher social class that organises and divides taxonomically the social realm is introduced in Horkheimer's "Materialism and Morality" as capable of claiming an unchallenged unconditional validity. The 'use utility' for those principles, as Horkheimer writes, is bound to be for "a rationally grounded morality (...) all the more necessary to dominate the masses in the state

---

<sup>62</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Negation (1925)," in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works: 1923–1925*, trans. James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 19 (London: Vintage, 2001), 235–43.

<sup>63</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," 38.

when a mode of action diverging from their life interests was demanded of them.”<sup>64</sup> Horkheimer’s reference to the masses as subjects to be dominated and to a will induced – plastically/psychically/ideologically and via forms of legality – for a self-regulating morality, is a point of departure when looking at Horkheimer’s essay “Materialism and Morality.” It acknowledges the dominated masses as subjects who are subjected to the power of a master minority class that no longer engages in direct physical combat, as with the previous Hegelian form of the master and slave, and how, instead, this minority class has become a unified force of domination against the (collectivised and politicised) mass of subjugated peoples.

Horkheimer’s pointing at morality as equal to religion for mediating an ideology that translates into a “mode of action diverging from their life interest,” like that of following the Ten Commandments, shows how it is so objectively required that focusing on the moral as a sublated religion needed to be conceptually crushed. Under this pressure and this emergency, one forgets to establish the notion that ours is also a moral judgement, a critical moral judgement that claims its legitimacy against the religious element in the moral instance. Hence the confusion regarding the various interpretations of Kant and Hegel here, because, as we will see further down, Kant can be brought back as a thinker of revolution.<sup>65</sup> Understanding the pressures of a given time and its implicit ideology helps us to see the reason for such rejection of morality and the need to escape and avoid it when working towards a materialist understanding of the project of Critical Theory. One possibility is that, due to its historical proximity to the still very active and ever-present bourgeois order from which Horkheimer et al. hoped to escape, it became paramount for the project to draw strong lines of demarcation from which morality, as identified with religion and bourgeois instrumental reason, had to be correspondingly negated.

The concept of negation is one thesis to be followed in order to assess how limited the potential for acknowledging its moral imperatives was for the task of Critical Theory at the time. Another thesis will be the absolute identification of morality with its sated signifier, to a point where it is not possible “not to be against” it, intending to retrieve it for other purposes. In Hegel’s critique of Kant from “The Scientific Ways

<sup>64</sup> Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality,” 16. The notion of ‘use utility’ is mine, here to highlight an instrumentalisation as utility, thus use of modes of evaluating such as what will entail a realm of unconditional validity in Ethics and Morals.

<sup>65</sup> It is worth paying attention to the actual discourses and proposal of Lea Ypi, which add comparative weight to previous works by Furner et al.

of Treating Natural Law, its Place in Moral Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law," we see how Hegel develops a series of concepts against Kant's Morals as that of his "rational immoralism." Identifying the dialectical inversion at work in Hegel when he regards Kant's formalist principles as perverse, deceptive, and immoral would be fundamental to understanding the set of problematics inherited by Marx and Marxism against morals, ethics, and morality more broadly. For Hegel, Kant's moral categories are a form of sophistry by which all sorts of rules of wickedness (once abstracted) can be adopted and justified on the grounds that they are not self-contradictory, and that thus "something specific" can be made into a categorically imperative duty.<sup>66</sup>

Horkheimer, too, advises us to take the side of materialism against Kant and his idealist, Enlightenment utopia. When these articles were written in the early 1930s, he argued for the necessity of superseding the utopian flavour of theoretical social morals: "The materialist theory of society is needed as a means to supersede the utopian character of the Kantian conception of a perfect constitution."<sup>67</sup> This advice contains in itself a complex dialectical reaction to morals, making it clearer for us that for Horkheimer materialism is a direct response to a reified and fixed idea of what morals are:

After all, the disparate interests of the individual are not ultimate facts; they do not have their basis in an independent psychological constitution, rather they are based on both the material relations and the real total situation of the social group to which the individual belongs. The absolutely incommensurable disparity of interests derives from the disparity of the relations of ownership; human beings today stand against one another as functions of various economic powers, of which each reveals to the others contradictory developmental tendencies.<sup>68</sup>

Horkheimer follows these indications by bringing up Kant's organic dreams of society perfected by reason, a gesture that recalls Marx's critique of the abstract character of Kant's thought and the emptiness of its proposed structures, which are then filled by the now common and obviously false world of actuality:

Kant employs the image of the organism in order to indicate the frictionless functioning of the future society; nothing in this suggests the faintest denial of the role of rational thought. Today, by contrast, the image of the

<sup>66</sup> G. W. F. Walsh, *Natural Law (The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law)*, Translated by T. M. Knox; Introduction by H. B. Acton. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975.) 109–10.

<sup>67</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 27.

<sup>68</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 27–8.

organism characterizes a system of dependency and economic inequality, one which can no longer justify itself before the world's expanded critical understanding and which therefore requires metaphysical phrases in order to reconcile people to it.<sup>69</sup>

We can grasp from this Horkheimer's reasons for criticising the use of the concept of organism to promote social inequality and dependency. We can also discern in Horkheimer's words a backhandedly positive view of what Kant was originally doing. For von Mises, on the contrary,

A society is only possible if everyone, while living his own life, at the same time helps others to live, if every individual is simultaneously means and end; if each individual's well-being is simultaneously the condition necessary to the well-being of the others, it is evident that the contrast between I and thou, means and end, automatically is overcome. This, after all, is just what the simile of the biological organism is supposed to make us perceive. In the organic structure no parts are to be regarded only as means and none only as ends. According to Kant the organism is a being 'in which everything is end and reciprocally also means'. Now Kant was thoroughly familiar with the nature of the organic, but he did not see – and in this he lagged far behind the great sociologists who were his contemporaries – that human society is formed according to the same principle.<sup>70</sup>

There is indeed no better way to understand the hostile, antagonistic interpretations of Kant, Hegel, Marx (and Horkheimer by extension) than having a close reading of the arguments (akin to psychological warfare) put forward by such a nemesis as von Mises.

Returning to the topic at hand, this close connection between the concept of organism and that of reason in society echoes the young Marx's concept of man as a species being. Marx believed in the conditions of possibility for the evolution of society towards a communist community, as defined in *The German Ideology*.<sup>71</sup> The very opposite happens in

<sup>69</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 28.

<sup>70</sup> von Mises, *Socialism*, 432.

<sup>71</sup> "The transformation, through the division of labour, of personal powers (relationships) into material powers, cannot be dispelled by dismissing the general idea of it from one's mind, but can only be abolished by the individuals again subjecting these material powers to themselves and abolishing the division of labour. This is not possible without the community. Only in community [with others has each] individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible. In the previous substitutes for the community, in the State, etc. personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class. The illusory community, in which individuals have up till now combined, always took on an independent existence in relation to them, and was at the same time, since it was the combination of one class over against another, not only a completely illusory community, but a new

Horkheimer's eyes, as the "organism is drawn into the matter in order to rationalise as an eternal relationship based on blind nature the fact that certain people make decisions and certain others carry them out, a state of affairs which the growth of all forces has made questionable."<sup>72</sup> Materialism, on the other hand, "attempts to delineate [...] the actual relationships from which the moral problem derives, and which are reflected, if only in a distorted fashion, in the doctrines of moral philosophy."<sup>73</sup> Thus we can conclude that Horkheimer already claims two things at once: 1) there are, in fact, "actual relationships" which give rise to moral problems, and so we are still always immersed in actualised moral problems; 2) "moral problems are reflected, if only in distorted fashion, in the doctrines of moral philosophy,"<sup>74</sup> – ergo the problems are implicitly located in the context or field of a moral philosophy that we inherit and have to grapple with.

Horkheimer, coming full circle, then states that, "the idea of morality, as it was formulated by Kant, contains the truth that the mode of action informed by the natural law of economic advantage is not necessarily the rational mode."<sup>75</sup> The fact that the possibility of a moral-legal principle, such as that of "economic advantage," stemming from a divided and divisive structure consolidated by the doctrine of natural law, is considered irrational in its "mode of action" is an extremely important point in relation to the critique of political economy and its ideology, especially in neo-liberal form. It can be suggested that the irrational origin of such reasoning for economic advantage is cynical or deranged, thus making possible a moral critique of the case of the unequal set-up reproducing itself through a moral mode of action. This points to an internal crisis of the field of morality, intersecting with law and jurisprudence. The crisis in turn poses the problem of an origin that asserts itself in irrationality in order to be later developed as rational under the "idea of morality," thus showing us the basis of what makes false morality work.

Following this, Horkheimer claims that "Whoever is in the economic situation of the bourgeois and is incapable of experiencing this whole conflict [of individual interests] has not kept pace developmentally, and lacks a type of reaction belonging to individuals of this period."<sup>76</sup>

---

fetter as well. In a real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association.", *Marx and Engels: 1845-47. German Ideology*, vol. Vol 5, Collected Works (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 171.

<sup>72</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 28.

<sup>73</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 21.

<sup>74</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 21.

<sup>75</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 21.

<sup>76</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 21.

This statement is organised as a moral judgement against the bourgeois consciousness; however, it does not recognise itself as such. Perhaps what follows explains why this is the case:

Morality, therefore, is by no means simply dismissed by materialism as mere ideology in the sense of false consciousness. Rather, it must be understood as a human phenomenon that cannot possibly be overcome for the duration of the bourgeois epoch. Its philosophical expression, however, is distorted in many respects. Above all, the solution of the problem does not lie in the observance of rigidly formulated commandments.<sup>77</sup>

Horkheimer recognises that there is a problem, a conflict, which cannot be resolved by observing strict, rigid commandments, but he also recognises that the problem is temporally bound.

We can judge the power of this idealistic and rigid metaphysics by its call for a mobilisation of stoicism, because this is the morality that the capitalists and the neo-liberals who followed them have managed to plant everywhere, somehow winning on the correlation of forces between stoicism and solidarity. The notion of rigid commandments, which appear as cold Kantian oughts, reveals a misconception about the possibility of morality. Here is what Horkheimer thinks about the categorical imperative:

"In the attempt to actually apply the Kantian imperative, it immediately becomes clear that the general interest the moral will is concerned about would not be helped in the least. Even if everyone were to comply with the imperative, even if everyone were to lead a virtuous life in its sense, the same confusion would continue to reign. Nothing essential would be changed."<sup>78</sup>

One of the overt concepts mobilised by the neo-liberal credo is freedom, which departs blindly and abstractly from necessity. This kind of freedom is also mobilised by the discourses that sustain fascism, past and present.

In fascism too, then, freedom appears as a Kantian imperative, completely devoid of context and totally self-serving as a mere abstract principle. The capitalist, bourgeois, fascist, and neo-liberal notion that necessity should be evacuated along with the social context and the notion of a free association of individuals is also a key issue. Horkheimer illustrates the moral implications of the submission not only to the economy but also to the laws and categories implicit in the reproduction of a dominated class:

The acquisition of moral principles was important for members of the higher social strata, since their position constantly demanded that they

<sup>77</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 22.

<sup>78</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 22.

make intervening decisions which they had earlier been absolved of by authority. At the same time, a rationally grounded morality became all the more necessary to dominate the masses in the state when a mode of action diverging from their life interests was demanded of them.<sup>79</sup>

We can see, following the critique of Kantian morality that Marxists maintain – keeping in mind the self-denial pointed out by Furner – that the problem with Kantian, rationally-based morality is its potential for an abstraction that can be applied in both directions: to the self-regulation of a particular class (here the bourgeoisie) and the domination of the masses (as a produced and reproduced class). The double-edged quality of the Copernican turn and system was further explored by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as the work produces a scenario pitting Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx against each other in a dialectical critique of Kantian reason.<sup>80</sup>

## 6. The Crisis in the Critique of Morals

In his critique of metaphysics, Horkheimer largely focuses on Jaspers's and Dilthey's historical and psychological typology of worldviews to diagnose what is wrong with the separation from the absolutised categories of the Kantian legacy of bourgeois liberal thought. The important thing for our current discussion, however, is Horkheimer's analysis of bourgeois liberalism, which depicts the classical denial and negation that follows the bourgeois liberal consciousness when it becomes a false consciousness and a totalising metaphysical system: "...bourgeois liberalism voices its critique of the claim to absoluteness made by its own thinking [...] The equality of rank given to various metaphysical ideas and the awareness of their radical historical conditioning are proof of a high degree of detachment from the power of categories originally absolutized by bourgeois liberal thought."<sup>81</sup> Horkheimer points at a lack of "knowledge of the social conditions governing [the] elaboration" of such absolutised categories and of their present historical relativisation, of what abstracted categorical tropes are used in a hypostatised form as "concepts of man, life, personality, and creative development", to advance the self-divided thesis of these metaphysicians, with the results of a "partial liberation from the particular ideas of the past" in which "the forms of world view and their transformations [are] themselves now

---

<sup>79</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 16.

<sup>80</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

<sup>81</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," 11.

clothed in the glorious garments of the metaphysical process." The separation and abstraction from the social conditions that govern such "absolutised categories," a concept central to liberal metaphysics, is observed by Horkheimer through the lens of a Marxist materialist paradigm. This approach allows for a critical examination of the complex relations of class power involved in the self-reification of the concept.

The negation of morals in Horkheimer called the attention of Eric Oberle, who in his work *Theodor Adorno and The Century of Negative Identity* explains that, in the 1930s and 40s, "the Frankfurt School theorists were engaged in defending the scientific value of metaphysical reflection and in criticising all theories of truth as adaptation, Pragmatism included."<sup>82</sup> He shows how Horkheimer, well ahead of Adorno, had already "warned against the attempt to naturalise metaphysics." Quoting the essay "Materialism and Metaphysics," Oberle explains that Horkheimer argued "that science undermined itself if it insisted that all events and experiences could be explained naturalistically." Rather, for Oberle, it is Horkheimer's insistence which had "merely placed a taboo on metaphysical and moral questions rather than answering them."<sup>83</sup> The question addressed here is precisely that of this tabooring of morals and metaphysics by Horkheimer; this tabooring shows that a problematic dynamic resides in the field of Marxist theory when tackling morals and ethics.

As some contemporary scholars have observed in the context of the Frankfurt School, albeit focused on Adorno, their praxis challenged the very foundations of their own critiques, as they employed a transdisciplinary approach to examine the complex issue of political economy.<sup>84</sup> One illustrative example here is the following claim from Horkheimer: "The absolutely incommensurable disparity of interests derives from the disparity of the relations of ownership; human beings today stand against one another as functions of various economic powers, of which each reveals to the others contradictory developmental tendencies."<sup>85</sup> Horkheimer's analysis of the whole trajectory of a morality based on an "irrational principle" originating in natural law around property, economic status, or advantage shows his concern to expose the fallacy

<sup>82</sup> Eric Oberle, *Theodor Adorno and the Century of Negative Identity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 89.

<sup>83</sup> Oberle, *The Century of Negative Identity*, 89.

<sup>84</sup> See Bonefeld and O'Kane, eds., *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, Critical Theory and the Critique of Society Series (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

<sup>85</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 28.

of said ‘bourgeois morality’ built on and around property rights.

This leads us directly to the later developments of neoliberalism and its discourses (based on rights and libertarian morals of the market) and how its highly skilled technocrats have based their success on a great instrumentalisation of jurisprudential ethics with narratives charged with revolutionary morals that only recognize freedom and never commit to duty.<sup>86</sup> As we have focused on finding the moral core at the heart of Critical Theory in Horkheimer’s critique of morality and metaphysics, a basic thing to do here will be to go back to his injunction that we live in a wrong, false world. But what is the normative ground that mediates this notion of wrongness?

If we take Horkheimer’s need for a Critical Theory in a world about which he will only state what is “wrong” as the basis for his direction, focus, and choice of issues to explicate and critique, then it is not possible for us to say that Horkheimer has successfully avoided being influenced by a very strong moral motivation and judgement.<sup>87</sup> Understanding the problem of – or at least problematising the lack of knowledge about – the social conditions that govern the elaboration of philosophical-historical or sociological categories is here the basis for Marxist politics and praxis. It is also a way by which a form of practical thinking suited for Critical Theory could come about. As we can see, Horkheimer’s materialism sets up as an oppositional normative ground that also reproduces the Kantian moves – along with the necessary Hegelian ones – when he attempts to ground it by locating “the normative basis of materialism in its immediate recognition of the validity [a value judgement] of feelings of solidarity and compassion and the hope for a better society.”<sup>88</sup>

The understanding of moral principles predicates the normative

---

<sup>86</sup> It is relevant here to relate this insight to Horkheimer’s statements about freedom vs. justice in Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality,” 37–8.

<sup>87</sup> Horkheimer also states that “[i]nstead, even in the face of pessimistic assessments, critical theory is guided by the unswerving interest in a better future,” at Horkheimer, “Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1975), 309–10.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Loralea Ann Michaelis: “In particular, what is lacking is a full appreciation of the ambivalence that was incorporated into the early formulation of critical theory over providing rational justification for the impulse toward a better society which the theory articulates. [...] Horkheimer’s leading position in determining the theoretical policy of the *Zeitschrift*, specifying the normative ground of critical theory finds its limit in a reconstructed understanding of Marxism as a ‘critical materialism’ fundamentally opposed to all forms of metaphysics, into which attempts to provide ultimate justification for norms are seen to inevitably degenerate” Loralea Ann Michaelis, “The Limits of Justification: Max Horkheimer’s Critical Materialism, 1931–1937” (Master’s thesis, University of Toronto, 1989), 6.

grounds behind (moral and ethical) feelings of solidarity in the face of human suffering due to wars under the regime of the military industrial complex, naturalised global famine, mass homelessness, modern slavery, and new forms of class warfare. Those are necessary when Critical Theory is deployed to argue in (Marxist) social and political critiques. This is where James Furner's argument or defence that there is an ethics inherent in Marx's work may apply:

[...] viewed as an argument against all morality, the ideology argument is self-undermining. This is because any proponent of the ideology argument must acknowledge that there is an impartial reason to institute social arrangements that reduce or eliminate false consciousness. Yet this is to acknowledge an impartial reason, the very quality that is said to make moral motivations ideological. One cannot argue against all morality by appeal to an argument that commits to a moral claim.<sup>89</sup>

The question here is what way of thinking involves the objective of exposing a negative (wrong, false) reality implicated in the so-called totality of the world? What way of thinking would be necessary for the subject and its critical collective formations to deal with a (negative) truth against which they will all work or even die for?<sup>90</sup> Was Horkheimer's Critical Theory, as a form of Marxist materialism, able to get rid of the syntaxis of the moral claim and the value judgement? Or did he unavoidably depended on both when arguing against all morality by appealing to an argument that committed to moral claims? Reading Horkheimer's "Materialism and Morality" retrospectively, as we have just done, we find a barely perceptible yet evolved critical and aporetic conjuncture when defining bourgeois stoic moral practices as those of acceptance before catastrophe instead of the mobilising of a moral sentiment aimed at liberation. But were Horkheimer's (moral) apprehensions at his own conclusion that the global scale of class division and catastrophe was like "the fall of antiquity" for our society indebted to a Kantian notion of *Aufklärung*?<sup>91</sup><sup>92</sup> And, was this (moral) denial and

<sup>89</sup> James Furner, *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant*, 16.

<sup>90</sup> This is reflected upon in the following quote, "Thought" in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "For this reason, nor only is the utterance which attacks power found intolerable but the one which gropes forward experimentally, playing with the possibility of error. Yet to be unfinished: and to know it is the mark even of the thought which opposes power, and especially of the thought for which it would be worth dying." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 203.

<sup>91</sup> Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 35.

<sup>92</sup> For further explorations of the connectivity between Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxian methods in Horkheimer, see Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory"; "Postscript"; and "The Social Function of Philosophy," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*,

rejection of morals a common thread between what Horkheimer had praised and the amoral neoliberal doctrine? The issue remains whether the (Marxist) disavowal of morals as a field upon which to fight moralism and its false, wrong aspects on its own terms is truly possible or radically necessary.

## Bibliography

- ADORNO, THEODOR W. *Minima Moralia*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. London: Verso, 2005.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- BONEFELD, WERNER AND CHRIS O'KANE, eds. *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*. Critical Theory and the Critique of Society Series, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
- FEHÉR, FERENC, ed. *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1990. doi:10.1525/9780520335875.
- FOSTER, JOHN BELLAMY. "Absolute Capitalism" 71 (2019)(1).
- FREUD, SIGMUND. "Negation (1925)". In *The Ego and the ID and Other Works: 1923-1925*, 235–243. London: Vintage, 2001.
- FURNER, JAMES. *Rescuing Autonomy from Kant: A Marxist Critique of Kant's Ethics*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023.
- HORKHEIMER, MAX. "Materialism and Metaphysics". In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum, 1933.
- . "Postscript". In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum, 1975.
- . *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926 - 1931 and 1950 - 1969*. Translated by Michael Shaw. A Continuum Book, New York: Seabury Press, 1978.
- . *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1982.
- 
- trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1975), 188–243, 244–52, and 253–72, respectively.

- . "Materialism and Morality". In *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993a.
- . "On the Problem of Truth". In *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993b.
- HORKHEIMER, MAX AND THEODOR W. ADORNO. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- HYPPOLITE, JEAN. *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History*. Translated by Bond Harris and B. Spurlock Jacqueline. Gainesville, FL: Univ. Press of Florida, 1996.
- LARISE, DUNJA. "Helene Bauer and Austrian School of Economics: Disputes on Neoliberalism and Social Democracy in the Early Twentieth Century" (2023) (61-1): 221–241. doi:10.4000/ress.10021.
- LÖWY, MICHAEL. *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005.
- MARX, KARL AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS. "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction". In *Marx and Engels: 1843-44, 175–188*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975.
- . *Marx and Engels: 1845-47. German Ideology*, volume Vol 5 of *Collected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976a.
- . "Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality, A Contribution to German Cultural History, Contra Karl Heinzen". In *Marx and Engels: 1845-48. Principles and Manifesto*, volume Vol 6 of *Collected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976b.
- MICHAELIS, LORALEA ANN. "The Limits of Justification: Max Horkheimer's Critical Materialism, 1931-1937", 1989.
- MISES, LUDWIG VON. *Socialism*. Translated by J. Kahane. 6th edition, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Incorporated, 2014.
- OBERLE, ERIC. *Theodor Adorno and the Century of Negative Identity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018.
- ROSE, GILLIAN. *Hegel Contra Sociology*. London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone, 1995.

———. *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. European Perspectives, paperback edition edition, New Yord: Columbia University Press, 2014.

ROSEN, MICHAEL. “The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology”. In *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*, edited by Edward Harcourt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

WALSH, W.H. “G.W.F. Hegel. Natural Law (The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law), Translated by T.M. Knox; Introduction by H.B. Acton. Pp. 137. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975.) \$10.95.” 13 (1977)(1): 109–110. doi:10.1017/S0034412500009781.

WHYTE, JESSICA. *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism*. London and New York: Verso, 2019.

WIGGERSHAUS, ROLF. *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*. Translated by Michael Robertson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

YPI, LEA. “On Revolution in Kant and Marx” 42 (2014)(3): 262–287. doi:10.1177/0090591714523138.

# On the Social Situation of Adorno’s Critical Music Theory

Zachary Loeffler

*If I prefer to write about music that is because I have all the mediating categories at my disposal.*

—Adorno, *Toward a New Manifesto*

*Social reflection on aesthetics habitually neglects the concept of productive force[s].*

—Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

*Dialectics is the quest to see the new in the old instead of just the old in the new.*

—Adorno, *Against Epistemology*

*The goal of revolution is the elimination of fear. This is why we need not fear the former, and need not ontologize the latter.*

—Adorno, Letter to Benjamin, March 18, 1936

Let us begin where one rarely does with Adorno, at the frontlines of direct proletarian action. And let us begin not simply with such worker militancy but with the validation of music for the sake thereof, since to begin in this way shifts everything, every scandalous watchword and inversion of emphasis from the formative to the late writings. Here, then, are two retrospectively odd passages from the early 1930s. In “On the Social Situation of Music,” which appeared in the first issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1932, Adorno writes the following qualification with respect to his analysis of the shortcomings of the *Gemeinshaftsmusik* produced by his old friend, collaborator, and rival Hanns Eisler:

The agitational value and therewith political correctness of proletarian communal music, for example, the choruses of Hanns Eisler, is beyond question, and only utopian-idealistic thinking could demand in its place a music internally suited to the function of the proletariat, but incomprehensible to the proletariat. However, as soon as music retreats from the

front of direct action, where it grows reflective and establishes itself as an artistic form, it is obvious that the structures produced cannot hold their own against progressive bourgeois production, but rather take the form of a questionable mixture of refuse from antiquated inner-bourgeois stylistic forms, including even those of petit bourgeois choral literature and from the remains of progressive ‘new’ music. Through this mixture the acuteness of the attack and the coherence [*Bündigkeit*: the organization] of every technical formulation is lost....It is, nevertheless, worthy of notice that in the figure of the proletarian composer most consequent for the present, Eisler, the Schoenberg School, from which he came forth, comes into contact with efforts seemingly contrary to the School itself. If this contact is to be fruitful, it must find dialectical employment: this music must intervene actively in consciousness through its own forms and not take instructions from the passive, one-sided position of the consciousness of the user—including the proletariat.<sup>1</sup>

Adorno similarly sings the praises of “political action” and the musical activity therein in the opening paragraph of his aphoristic essay “Music in the Background,” written around 1934:

In our immediate life there is no longer a place for music. Anyone who, by himself, wanted to sing out loud in the street would run the risk of being arrested as a disturber of the peace....Only political action can possibly unleash the physical reality of song for a few brief hours....If you are looking for music, you have to step outside the space of immediate life, because it no longer is one, and find the lost immediacy where it costs the price of admission, at the opera, at a concert.<sup>2</sup>

A number of interrelated curiosities no doubt leaps out to anyone familiar with Adorno’s critical theory of music in its received forms. For starters, Adorno, the theorist of functionless art qua critique of praxis as unfreedom, strongly endorses functional music in the service of direct revolutionary action (even as he acknowledges the limits of such music and the evanescence of such action, as well as their baleful social implications with regard to the bourgeois individual). At the same time, he writes ambivalently about the art music cloistered away from the functional world of capital in concert halls and opera houses, to the extent that its power comes at a cost.

Nested within this inversion of one of the central oversimplifications of the reception of Adorno’s critical music theory is a perhaps more striking twist of the conventional wisdom (roughly, the view that Adorno’s

---

<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Social Situation of Music,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University California Press, 2002), 411. “Coherence,” which appears in the standard translation, is probably not the best rendering of *Bündigkeit*. But “concision” or “precision” is not exactly felicitous either. What is meant will become clearer below.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, “Music in the Background,” in *Essays on Music*, 506.

theorizing amounts to, as Buck-Morss words it, "Marx Minus the Proletariat," a Marxism that fails to heed to the practical injunction of the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach<sup>3</sup>). Adorno, especially in the slightly earlier essay, seems to believe that even as late as 1932 he is living through a moment when (as he writes later in the *History and Freedom* lectures) "change [is] close," and that the objective possibility of that change can be secured through the direct action of workers. By "change," Adorno of the 1960s means nothing short of the realization of freedom through the elimination of the necessity of privation "for all mankind, universally and on a global scale."<sup>4</sup> And by the qualification "direct," Adorno seems to be referring to the council communist program that emerged from the workers' and soldiers' councils that shook the German Reich beginning in November of 1918, a program that privileged decentralized militancy over the bureaucratic party.<sup>5</sup> As Sohn-Rethel writes in *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, "The new development of Marxist thought which [the first generation of critical theory] represent[s] evolved as the theoretical and ideological superstructure of the revolution that never happened. In it re-echo the thunder of the gun battle for the Marstall in Berlin at Christmas 1918, and the shooting of the [Spartacist Uprising] the following winter."<sup>6</sup>

A further curiosity with respect to the opening passages concerns the relation between theory and praxis vis-à-vis music, which points to a core tension between Adorno and Eisler. Adorno met Eisler in Vienna in the 20s. Over the next two decades, they became comrades and collaborators, "jointly and definitively" writing together *Composing for the Films* during their California exile (Adorno's co-authorship was, in his words, withdrawn from the original 1947 publication when HUAC went after Eisler for his brother's political activities, causing Adorno to fear their association might prevent him from returning to Europe).<sup>7</sup> Eisler

<sup>3</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "Marx Minus the Proletariat: Theory as Praxis," in *The Origins of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 181–183.

<sup>5</sup> Felix Baum and Blumenfeld, "The Frankfurt School and Council Communism," in *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 1160–1178.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021), xx.

<sup>7</sup> "Jointly and definitively" is from Adorno's "Postscript" to the 1969 edition of *Composing for the Films*, where he also offers his explanation for the original elision of his co-authorship. See Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 167–169. For a helpful account of the relationship between Adorno and Eisler, see Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 149–162.

was a standout student of Schoenberg whose sister and brother were prominent members of the KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*). After moving to Berlin in 1925, Eisler taught classes on music from a historical materialist perspective at the Party's educational arm, the *Berliner Marxistischen Arbeitschule*, where he helped form the *Kampfgemeinschaft der Arbeitersänger* (Fighting Association of Working Singers). After the War, Eisler abandoned his own avant-garde musical practice and took up residence in the GDR, composing its national anthem and helping to write the Second International Congress of Composers and Musicologists' Prague Declaration (an attempt to resolve the "profound crisis" of contemporary music, expressed in the conflict between serious music and light music, that affirmed the Central Committee's socialist realist program—in short, the proscription of "tendencies of extreme subjectivism" as well as "complex forms of instrumental wordless symphonic music" in favor of harmonious vocal forms "most concrete in their contents."<sup>8</sup>)

In contrast to Eisler, Adorno returned permanently to the Federal Republic in 1953, where he continued to give shape to his revolutionary politics through music severed from material praxis and to voice his increasing dismay with the Soviet Thermidor. Indeed, he responded forcefully to the Prague Declaration in an untranslated essay titled "Die gegängelte Musik." There he accuses Eisler et al. not only of following the Nazis in turning spirit into the delusion it once criticized and of failing to see how "exhortations to abandon subjectivism" are incompatible with "a society based on solidarity," but also of trying to fix the so-called crisis of music (and thus the contradiction between the individual and society) by mere decree, that is, of reducing the separation of musical production and audience, originality and popular appeal, to the fault of composers and thus addressing art in isolation, when "the reasons [for what is problematic about music] lie in the social totality."<sup>9</sup>

The tension between Adorno and Eisler is sometimes portrayed as a consequence of Adorno's supposed postwar apostasy, which is said to have put him at odds with the genuine communists, that is, those who avowed and defended Comintern politics even after the Moscow trials and execution of Bukharin—namely, Brecht, Bloch, and Eisler.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of 10 February 1948" and "Declaration of the Second International Congress of Composers and Musicologists in Prague, 29 May 1948," in Nicholas Slonimsky, *Music Since 1900* (New York: Shirmer, 1994), 1056 and 1068.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, "Die gegängelte Musik," in *Gesammalte Schriften*, Band 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> See e.g., Claussen, 303–4. Adorno mentions Bloch and Eisler cracking jokes

But first off, conversations between Adorno and Horkheimer in the 50s affirm “communism” while inveighing against both “the Russians” and Adenauer (the Christian-Democratic Chancellor of the Federal Republic).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Adorno and Eisler’s friendship, or at least their mutual respect for each another, seems to have persisted during the Cold War—indeed, Adorno defended Eisler’s rewriting of *Composing for the Films* in accordance with “official Soviet policy” for its 1949 GDR republication, something he did not do in analogous cases, and Eisler visited Adorno in Frankfurt during the 50s.<sup>12</sup> More important than matters of political biography, close reading of Adorno’s and Eisler’s respective writings before the Cold War reveals that there were, from the beginning, fundamental fissures in their theories of capitalist society and the resulting communist politics.

While there is much overlap in the early writing of Adorno and Eisler, and while Adorno appears to have been deeply enamored with Eisler’s composition, his mostly celebratory 1929 review of Eisler’s *Zeitungsausschnitte op.11* shows reservations about the composer’s “theoretical and sociological development” with respect to the musical forces and relations of production:

There is a danger that for the sake of comprehensibility, the musical means have not been brought fully up to the current state of musical modernity....It would be possible, therefore, for a revolutionary political conviction to attract revolutionary aesthetic ones, whereas if that revolutionary conviction were to be entirely persuasive, it would have to adopt the technical methods that are in tune with the very latest historical achievements. This then is the problem with Eisler’s future development, not simply his internal development as a composer, be it noted, but his sociological and theoretical development, since he cannot remain blind to the difference between music that is appropriate in its own terms to the stage reached by society and music that is actually consumed by present-day society.<sup>13</sup>

This passage resonates with the opening quotation from “On the Social Situation of Music.” Two tensions appear in the related excerpts: a conflict between comprehensibility, function, use-value, practice, etc. and the progressive rationalization of the musical material, that is, between the relations of production (the culture industry’s demand for accessibility and purposiveness as a prerequisite of salability) and the growth of

---

about the killing of Bukharin in particular.

<sup>11</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2019), 63–4.

<sup>12</sup> Claussen, 149–162. The quoted material is from the “Postscript” of *Composing for the Films*.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Claussen, 155.

the musical forces of production (progressive technical control over/rationalization of the musical material); and a conflict between Eisler's composition, his formation of the musical material, and the musical material's general state of the development. Musical material is a difficult concept, whose fuller elaboration lies ahead; it refers *not* to "raw" material but to the bequeathed, historically and socially determinate conventions, genres, forms, schemata, techniques, etc. that confront the composer as problems demanding negotiation in the pursuit of "musical sense" or immanent monadological coherence—in short, "the objectified and critically reflected state of the technical productive forces of an age with which any given composer is inevitably confronted."<sup>14</sup> Adorno's claim in the two passages is that insofar as Eisler's politically correct proletarian music pursues comprehensibility over the progressive technical domination of the musical material, it sacrifices organization, composition, integral design, etc. and thus the sharpness of its critique. Adorno appears to be saying that when music "retreats from the front of direct action" and becomes "reflective," taking on the character of critical cognition as it establishes itself as art, its power with respect to the ends of direct revolutionary action does not depend on the composer-producer's injection of "commitment" into the work but on compliance with the social and historical requirements of the musical material. To risk supplementing these passages with later writings, when compositions "surrender themselves unconditionally to the material content of their time,"

---

<sup>14</sup> The longer quotation is from Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," in *Quasi una fantasia* (London: Verso, 2011), 281. For a introduction to Adorno's concept of the musical material from a musicological perspective, see Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). On "musical sense," see Adorno's lecture "Criteria of New Music" (1957), in Adorno, *The New Music Kranichstein Lectures*, trans. Wieland Hoband (Cambridge: Polity, 2021). On the musical forces and relations of production, see Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 88–9: "The contradiction between the forces of production and relations of production also becomes manifest as one between relations of production and the products themselves. These contradictions are so heightened that progress and reaction have lost their univocal meaning. To still paint a picture or write a quartet may live behind the division of labor and the experimental set up and film production, but the objective technical form of the painting and the quartet safeguards the potential of film, but today is thwarted by the mode of its production. The 'rationality' of the painting and the quartet, however chimerically sealed in on itself and problematic in its uncommunicativeness, stands higher than the rationalization of film production. Film production, manipulates, predetermined objects that are from the beginning and retrospectively, conceived and in resignation it abandons them to their externality without intervening in the object itself other than intermittently. However, from the many angles of reflection that photography powerlessly lets fall on the objects that it reproduces, Pablo Picasso constructs objects that defy them. The situation is no different with 12-tone composition."

"integrat[ing] layers of material...into their immanent law of form," they express in purely musical terms "the unavoidable contradictions" that are central to "the fermentation of social knowledge," becoming more impartial than any historical document, becoming "the unconscious historiography of their epoch," "historiography from the perspective of the victims"—not only reflections of the social whole but also critical self-reflections of "those elements which [resist] integration," that is, "traces of blood in fairytale"; on the other hand, when compositions do not do this, when they fail to break off communication with "all-embracing blindness and delusion" and give in to heteronomous necessity and randomness, the upshot is music's consumption—its uncritical digestion by existing social consciousness and the foreclosure of class struggle.<sup>15</sup> Adorno clarifies that critical cognition was once possible in music without the cutting off of social communication, but since Beethoven, "a direct correlation has emerged between the social isolation of music and the seriousness of its objective social content"—"what should be close at hand, the 'consciousness of suffering,' becomes unbearably alien."<sup>16</sup>

As we will see, older Adorno appears to have found this matter rather more complicated than he did in the late 20s and early 30s, but nevertheless, this objection brings us to the heart of the tension between Eisler and Adorno, which centers on themes to which the emphasis on music's critical, cognitive character point. In "Our Revolutionary Music," written the same year as "On the Social Situation of Music," Eisler divides revolutionary music somewhat like Adorno into "the mass fighting song" and "music to be listened to," the former "practical" and the latter "theoretical."<sup>17</sup> The difference between Adorno and Eisler is that Eisler thinks that "music for listening to" can take a positive role in educating and activating the proletariat. Adorno, on the other hand, argues that the social and historical situation of music, the proletariat, and the individual composer is such that art music (that is, "music for listening to") can only take a negative role in revolutionary politics, and that this role is outside the ambit of proletarian understanding. The upshot of this argument is twofold: an unusual accent for a politically

<sup>15</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 182–3 and 7; Adorno, *Aesthetics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 48; Adorno, "Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music," in *Sound Figures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 12; Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," 320; Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, "Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music," in *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 12–14.

<sup>17</sup> Eisler, "Our Revolutionary Music," in *Hanns Eisler: A Rebel in Music*, ed. Manfred Grabs (New York: international Publishers, 1978), 59–60.

radical aesthetics on the dianoetic; and an uncompromising communism increasingly antagonistic to the Soviet Union's failure to realize its promise.

At the start and conclusion of the opening "On the Social Situation" passage, Adorno clearly deprioritizes the self-consciousness of the proletariat in revolutionary struggle. In fact, he seems to deny the positive existence of proletarian class-consciousness altogether, insofar as the music internally suited to revolution is incomprehensible to workers. He also states that if contact between the proletarian Eisler and the apolitical, bourgeois Schoenberg School from which Eisler emerged is to bear revolutionary fruit, its music "must intervene actively in consciousness through its own forms," rather than "take instructions from the passive, one-sided position of the consciousness of [its proletarian] user." In whose consciousness is revolutionary music to intervene if not the worker who uses it? Adorno's political investment in the imminently developing artwork severed from utility (from praxis under the spell of labor, praxis that has blocked happiness) also entails a political investment in the useless intellectual adequate to its understanding. As Adorno writes to Horkheimer in March of 1936 and would soon replicate in his famous March 18<sup>th</sup> letter to Benjamin, "The proletariat needs intellectuals for revolution just as much as intellectuals need the proletariat"; indeed, Adorno continues, it is a mistake to place "trust in the proletariat as though it were a blind World Spirit, tolerating specifically those characteristics of it which were produced by bourgeois machinery, characteristics which our precise task is to transform with knowledge."<sup>18</sup> To be sure, young Adorno describes the relationship between the intellectual and the proletariat in terms of practical solidarity at which it is hard to envision even the most orthodox revolutionary bristling. For instance, a 1931 fragment imagines "the starving expert who unremittingly follows the inner parts in the score of *Tristan*" and enthusiastic dock workers building the barricades of the revolution from the cheap seats of the theater gallery that they share.<sup>19</sup> What is more, the letters to Horkheimer and Benjamin not only evince Adorno's esteem, in tension with his councilist inclinations, for specialist "planning" and Lenin's writings, as well as his critique of Benjamin's "anarchistic romanticism" of unmediated praxis, but also his life-long contempt for the anti-intellectualism that was characteristic of his teenage bullies and that would become closely

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Dirk Braunstein, *Adorno's Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Adam Baltner (Chicago: Haymarket, 2022), 54–6.

<sup>19</sup> Adorno, "The Natural History of the Theatre," in *Quasi una fantasia*, 67–8.

associated with Nazism, socialist realism, and the culture industry.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the letters also adumbrate his later positions that so often elicit charges of quietism and aestheticism: in particular, the postwar prioritization of theory in the historical fluctuation of the theory-praxis interrelation, that is, the position that led to Adorno's fallout with his protesting students in 1969—namely, his view of thinking as preserving the objective possibility of happiness when “no higher form of society is concretely visible.” To clarify, later Adorno contends that when the historical circumstances are non-revolutionary (e.g., when proletarians have more to lose than their chains), then what was revolutionary activity under felicitous conditions degenerates into mere “actionism,” “pseudo-revolution,” or “pseudo-activity,” and what's more, “uncompromisingly critical” thinking, as well as contemplative artworks that recoil from immediate praxis or overt political “commitment,” become “more akin to transformative praxis than a comportment that is compliant for

---

<sup>20</sup> On “planning” and the dialectic of organization and spontaneity, see, for example, Adorno, “Anton Webern,” in *Impromptus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 49–50; Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1981), 111; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 192; Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in *Critical Models*, trans. H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 274; Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 292–3. In the well-known March 18, 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno writes that Benjamin's Artwork essay “is among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory that I have encountered since I read [Lenin's] *The State and Revolution*.” What's more, he states, “For if you render rightly technicization and alienation dialectical, but not in equal measure the world of objectified subjectivity, the political effect is to credit the proletariat (as the cinema's subject) directly with an achievement which, according to Lenin it can realize only through a theory introduced by intellectuals as dialectical subjects, who themselves belong to the sphere of works of art which you have consigned to Hell.” In Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 120–26. In a letter to Horkheimer dated March 21, 1936, Adorno mentions Lenin twice. He states that Fromm has put him in the “paradoxical situation of having to defend Freud. He is both sentimental and false, a combination of social democracy and anarchism; above all, there is a painful absence of dialectical thinking. He takes far too simple a view of authority, without which, after all, neither Lenin's vanguard nor his dictatorship is conceivable. I would urgently advise him to read Lenin.” He also writes, “Marx was too harmless; he probably imagined quite naively that human beings are basically the same in all essentials and will remain so. It would be a good idea, therefore, to deprive them of their second nature. He was not concerned with their subjectivity; he probably didn't look into that too closely. The idea that human beings are the products of society down down to the innermost core is an idea that he would have rejected as a milieu theory. Lenin was the first person to assert this.” Quoted in Braunstein, 51 and Claussen, 233. Later, in the *Towards a New Manifesto* discussions with Horkheimer, Adorno also mentions Lenin several times, at one point stating “I have always wanted to...develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, while while keeping up with culture at its most advanced” (64). On the bullying Teddy suffered, see Claussen, 57–60.

the sake of praxis.”<sup>21</sup>

What the letters to Horkheimer and Benjamin, as well as the initial quotation, elide (and what will be discussed further below) is that Adorno views the autonomous, useless intellectual he privileges much like he views the autonomous, useless artwork he privileges, as an indictment of the unfree society from which it and the corresponding division of labor arise: “intellectual pursuit is still the natural mode of existence for the sons of rich parents,” Adorno writes to Horkheimer in 1945.<sup>22</sup> In *Minima Moralia*, he states with respect to the intellectual, “His own distance from business at large is a luxury which only that business confers,” a point that closely resembles the claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that bourgeois art is free only because bourgeois society is not.<sup>23</sup> Another *Minima Moralia* aphorism puts it even more powerfully: “That intellectuals are at once beneficiaries of a bad society, and yet those on whose socially useless work it largely depends whether a society emancipated from utility is achieved—this is not a contradiction acceptable once and for all and therefore irrelevant....Whatever the intellectual does is wrong.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> The quoted material is from Adorno, “Resignation,” in *Critical Models*, 292–3 and “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in *Critical Models*. Also see Adorno and Horkheimer *Towards a New Manifesto*, 54; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 143; and Adorno and Marcuse, ‘Correspondence on the German Student Movement’, *New Left Review* I(233) (January–February 1999): 123–36. On how the proletariat having more to lose than their chains puts mass revolution in doubt, see Adorno, “Reflections on Class Theory,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 103.

Adorno’s shameful calling of the police into the university will be addressed at the conclusion of this paper, but his sympathies for the student opposition seem to have been deeper than is often acknowledged. Wiggershaus notes that he prefaced his June 6, 1967 lecture on aesthetics with a condemnation of the killing of Benno Ohnesorg and shortly after met with members of the SDS: “He had made it a condition of the meeting that it should not be recorded on tape. What he said during the meeting would have made him a celebrated mentor of the protest movement if it had been stated in public; he was already one of its uncelebrated mentors.” Another important clarification with respect to praxis comes from Jameson, who emphasizes that Adorno’s distance from praxis became a kind of praxis in its own right in Adorno’s antipositivist struggle within the academic disciplines of restoration Federal Republic Germany. Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 619–21; Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007), e.g., 7.

<sup>22</sup> Braunstein, 228.

<sup>23</sup> Adorno, “Antithesis,” in *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 26; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 107.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno, “Little Hans,” in *Minima Moralia*, 133. This sentiment echoes what Adorno wrote to Krenek in a September 30, 1932 letter: “I would agree with Benjamin’s statement concerning the scar on the body of society, namely, we intellectuals: admittedly, not without thinking of what Kierkegaard says of despair in *Sickness unto Death*, namely, that the sickness, dialectically, is at the same time the cure.” Adorno and Krenek,

To return to the “Music in the Background” passage, to Adorno’s perhaps unexpected ambivalence with respect to useless art-music as opposed to the functional songs of political action, a central aspect of Adorno’s theory of freedom and his uncompromising communism is the idea that there is no outside the “nexus of social guilt,”<sup>25</sup> or that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”<sup>26</sup> Even a truly spontaneous thought “wrested from what is” (say, from the capitalist social reality that discountenances functionlessness) only “hold[s] good” inasmuch as “it is also marked... by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape.”<sup>27</sup> Every attribution of aesthetic value by Adorno likewise entails “bad conscience,” insofar as even the greatest music of capitalist culture “bears the mark of Cain.”<sup>28</sup> As Adorno writes in 1960, “The focusing of my own interests on aesthetics...has something evasive about it, something ideological—and that is the case even before we come to questions of content.”<sup>29</sup> For as Adorno emphasizes, the critical freedom of functionless art from the irrational rationality of social praxis that reverses means into ends—the freedom secured through progressive mastery of the artistic material that makes music incomprehensible to the laboring oarsmen whose ears are stuffed with wax—presupposes

---

Briefwechsel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 37.

Adorno often describes the paradoxical historical and social situation of the intellectual in terms redolent of those he uses to describe the artwork, where marginalization, functionless, and impotence are the price of power. Thus, while the individual theorist is good for nothing, “cut off from practical life,” their functionlessness means “an infinitesimal freedom” otherwise unavailable. In addition to the two *Minima Moralia* aphorisms, see Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Towards a New Manifesto*, 51–4.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 120.

<sup>26</sup> Adorno, “Refuge for the Homeless,” in *Minima Moralia*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Adorno “Finale,” in *Minima Moralia*, 247. Also see Horkheimer and Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 29–34.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 204 and 205. Also see 19–20: “The fact which expresses the antagonistic state of the whole is that even musically correct modes of conduct may, by their positions in the whole, cause moments of disaster. Whatever we do will be wrong....In view of such complications there is nobody in the intimidated, overtaxed, captive audience of millions to shake a finger at and tell that he must know something about music, or at least must take an interest in it. Even the freedom of release from such obligations has an aspect of human dignity—that of a state of affairs in which culture is no longer forced upon one. A man gazing peacefully at the sky may at times be closer to truth than another who accurately follows the ‘Eroica.’ But in thus failing culture he compels conclusions about the way culture has failed mankind, and about what the world has made of mankind. The contradiction between the freedom of art and the gloomy diagnoses regarding the use of such freedom—this contradiction is one of reality, not just of the consciousness that analyzes reality so as to make some small contribution to change.”

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Claussen, 305.

class privilege, that is, an unfree society: “[art’s] distance [from the guilt context of the living] allows the guilt context to prevail.”<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, the “quality,” “success,” and “greatness” of music since late Beethoven has lied in its capacity to reflect critically upon its guilty autonomy or “semblance” [*Schein*], that is, its appearance or illusion as an absolutely integrated, monadological reality at a distance from empirical immediacy (the sensuous stuff of vibrating air and paint perceived in the here and now). As Adorno writes, “Artworks that want to free themselves of their guilt weaken themselves as artworks.”<sup>31</sup> Music does justice to art’s *promesse du bonheur* (its promise of happiness) and its claim to radicalism only by speaking the truth in the sense of “present[ing] fulfillment in its brokenness,” by making manifest a negative “truth-content” [*Wahrheitsgehalt*]—“all its happiness is in the knowledge of unhappiness.”<sup>32</sup>

Peter E. Gordon is thus undoubtedly right to deny the “gnostic” reading of Adorno and to attribute a positive moment to his thought, namely, the “maximalist” normative demand for “the right life,” which Gordon describes as a postulate of critical practice redolent of Kant’s postulates of practical reason, a requisite standard against which immanent critique determines current conditions have failed to deliver on their promises.<sup>33</sup> I would add what Gordon seems reticent to as he reaches for anodyne designations like “nondoctrinal materialism”: that the maximalism of the demand bespeaks an uncompromising communist politics—“the right life” is not just a necessary presupposition of social critique akin to immortality vis-à-vis Kantian ethics, that is, a necessary formal demand which is, in Gordon’s words, “impossibly strong” materially. It is also a “cause” in the political sense, a program whose goal is “life without fear,” the attainment of which is doubtful but nonetheless possible (in fact, Adorno writes to Horkheimer in 1962 that any time the historical circumstances could once again become revolutionary, with the accent

<sup>30</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 107–8; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 144.

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 208.

<sup>32</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 111. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 102; Adorno, *The New Music Kranichstein Lectures*, 151: “If the concept of radicalism has any purpose in art, it can only be that one take art seriously in the sense that art itself has the unambiguity of the truth”; Adorno *Aesthetic Theory*, 135–6: “[Aesthetic experience] is possibility promised by its impossibility. Art is the ever broken promise of happiness.”

<sup>33</sup> Peter E. Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023). References to “the right life” abound in Adorno; see, for example, “Toy Shop,” *Minima Moralia*, 228.

in the theory-praxis dialectic shifting to praxis: "Situations may arise today or tomorrow which, while they are very likely to be catastrophic at the same time restore the possibility of practical action which is today obstructed"<sup>34</sup>). This "life without fear" entails universal freedom, the basis of which, Adorno writes, is the elimination of the systematic necessity that impedes direct access to the means of life and is the source of capitalist class domination.<sup>35</sup> I would also underline what is at times obscured in Gordon's argument and repeat the point made at the conclusion of the previous paragraph: that the positive moment lies entirely within the tenebrous realm of "consummate negativity," in the realm where every reformist amelioration fails, where every exercise of freedom is an expression of domination, since such is the truth of our social reality.<sup>36</sup> If "the True is the whole" (Hegel), and if "the whole is false" or "wrong life" (Adorno), then truth, and the anticipation of "the right life," lies in the false.<sup>37</sup> In a rehearsal of the elusive "positive" concept of enlightenment, a concluding fragment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* emphasizes, "Invocation of the sun is idolatry. Only the spectacle of the tree withered in its heat gives a presentiment of the majesty of the day which will not scorch the world on which it shines."<sup>38</sup> Insofar as the denial of the falsity of the equation of the whole with truth is the giving of voice to the nonidentical that is repressed and mutilated in false wholeness, it is an anticipation of a truly emancipated society that nonetheless does not escape the mutilations of the false one. But even this formulation does not capture that extent of Adorno's negativity, inasmuch as the point is not simply "to realize the broken promises of modernity" (for example, the promises of equivalent exchange and of the bourgeois artwork) but to do justice to them by abolishing the social practices in which they adhere.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 566.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon 105–9, 139–42; Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 181–183."

<sup>36</sup> Adorno, "Finale," in *Minima Moralia*, 247.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*; trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §20, 11; *Minima Moralia*, 50.

<sup>38</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 182.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, xiv; Adorno and Horkheimer, "Theses on Need," in *Toward a New Manifesto*, 88–89; Adorno, "Progress," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 143–144. Also relevant here is *Aesthetic Theory*, 319.

The final lines of "*Vers une musique informelle*" also afford the opportunity to respond to Gordon's project, insofar as they emphasize both concrete possibility and negativity: "Informal music is a little like Kant's eternal peace, Kant himself thought of this as an actual, concrete possibility which is capable of realization and yet is nevertheless just an idea. The idea of every artistic utopia today is to make things in ignorance of what they

To further understand Adorno's *political* investment in music that has retreated from direct action and is incomprehensible to the proletariat, and to better understand how this investment qualifies as "historical materialist" and "communist" (how Marcuse could speak to Adorno of "our cause" even as the two occupied opposing sides of the student movement with respect to theory and praxis<sup>40</sup>), we need to dig deeper into "On the Social Situation of Music." This digging will reveal Adorno's critical theory of music (and thus his critical theory in general) in its communistic light—as a remarkably consistent, lifelong attempt to "develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, while keeping up with culture at its most advanced"<sup>41</sup>—by making explicit the social situation from which and for the sake which it is motivated.<sup>42</sup>

\* \* \*

The elliptical, dense, at times disjunct prefatory material of Adorno's first essay for the first issue of the Institute's journal consists of a single extended paragraph unfolding over four pages in its original publication. Here Adorno offers an "Outline" of perhaps the first historical materialist theory of music, explicitly claiming the designation and contrasting it with "a mere exercise in intellectual history" (393). In brief, the "Outline" summarizes the paradoxical situation of music in "late capitalism" for the sake of clarifying the peculiar circumstances where it is "better," where it "preserves its right to existence" and "fulfills its social function more precisely" (393), doing justice to its promise to satisfy the needs immediate social reality denies (421). In other words, the point of the "Outline" is to sketch the odd social conditions under which music does not merely fulfill its promise of happiness "ideologically" but truly lives up to it. According to Adorno, it can do so only by revealing the social antinomies responsible for its separation from social life, that is, by expressing "the exigency of the social condition" and "[calling] for change through the coded language of suffering." Inasmuch as it calls for change by making manifest the full extent of the social contradictions in which it is mired and thus giving voice to suffering, Adorno argues, music enters into a dialectical relationship with revolutionary praxis.

---

are."

<sup>40</sup> Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," *New Left Review* I/233 (January–February 1999): 124.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Toward a New Manifesto*, 69.

<sup>42</sup> I am thus following Jameson's "synchronous" approach from *Late Marxism* (first published in 1990), which opposes "the rather shallow view" of Adorno's postwar apostasy and instead considers Adorno's writings "as parts of a single unfolding [Marxist] system." Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 3–4.

The opening sentence of the "Outline" takes the form of an antinomy to which Adorno often refers in his writings about art: all music today clearly traces the contradictions and flaws of society; at the same time, it is cut off from society by society's flaws (391). In other words, music has a critical social function, giving shape to society's problems in its material structures with exceptional limpidity, only to the extent that it is socially functionless and incomprehensible, meaning society cannot access music's inner, living social significance. For, Adorno suggests, "the role of music in the social process is exclusively that of a commodity." Insofar as the general social function of music is exclusively that of a commodity, "[music] no longer serves direct needs nor benefits from direct application" but adjusts to "the pressure of the exchange of abstract units," meaning music's value is determined by use (for the sake of exchange) and functionless music is therefore socially worthless. "Through the total absorption of both musical production and consumption by the capitalistic process" Adorno concludes, "the alienation of music from man has become complete." Gone are apparent enclaves of pre-capitalistic immediacy, such as those of the nineteenth-century domestic sphere before "techniques of radio and sound film, in the hands of powerful monopolies and in unlimited control over the total capitalistic propaganda machine" came to inhabit their "innermost cells." Moreover, "[The balance between individual production and understanding]"—the equilibrium between the development of the musical forces of production and the relations of production—"has been totally destroyed," such that progressive music is unsaleable and hated.

As in the opening chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the emphasis on the "total" character of this situation is misleading. Adorno next clarifies that the process through which the general social function of music has become solely that of a commodity has involved "the objectification and rationalization of music" (392)—the increasing control over the musical material and the transformation of the musical construct into something objective and lawful in itself—which has meant not only "[music's] separation from the simple immediacy of use" (presumably its transformation into functionless works of art that no longer serve the purposes of their former church and court patrons) but also the endowment of music "with the power of far-reaching sublimation of drives and the cogent and binding expression of humanity" (its communicative power, as well as its promissory and universal character, as integrated aesthetic form at a distance from sensuous, practical immediacy).

A number of overlapping points follow that are meant to elucidate

the central aporia of the essay—"the situation from which every observation upon the social position of music which hopes to avoid the deceptions which today dominate discussions of the subject must proceed." Clarifying that he is no romantic pining for return to musical immediacy, Adorno states that not only is the restoration of simple immediacy a retreat into myth but that the process of progressive development through which music has come to assume the exclusive role of a commodity has not been taken far enough; it is has been cut short, Adorno writes, for the sake of maintaining capitalist class relations: "Now...rationalized music has fallen victim to the same dangers as rationalized society within which class interest bring rationalization to a halt as soon as it threatens to run against class conditions themselves. This situation has now left man in a state of rationalization which—as soon as the possibility of his dialectic development is blocked—crushes him between unresolved contradictions." Adorno is clearly taking a page from classical Marxism, building on the contention that if the progressive rationalization immanent to the development of wealth on the capitalist basis were carried to its logical conclusion, it would mean the overcoming of bourgeois class domination; as Adorno writes in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, a sort of update of "On the Social Situation of Music" written three decades later, the bourgeoisie is "the historic instance of a class that voids the static order and yet cannot yield, unfettered, to its own dynamics without voiding itself."<sup>43</sup> The point seems to be that insofar as the relations of production (the imperatives of salability) are at odds with the development of the forces of production (the progressive rationalization of the musical material), the latter is blocked and painful aporias follow—namely, the social process that has humanized music and constituted it as a spiritual art-object has taken it away from humans (stripping it of its direct utility) and "left [them] only with a semblance [*Schein*]," that is, an illusory aesthetic reality at a distance from sensuous, material praxis). Adorno concludes that "insofar as [music] did not submit to the command of the production of commodities, [it] was robbed of its social responsibility and exiled into a hermetic space within which its contents are removed." In sum, progressive rationalization in music, to the extent that it is at odds with the reproduction of capitalist class domination, has meant the pursuit of "authenticity" at the expense of "comprehensibility" (411); music that has resisted the social pressures that mediate it and make it what it is has become incomprehensible.

---

<sup>43</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 214.

Adorno's "Outline" of music's social situation does not end here. He adds that music "became conscious of its own reification and of its alienation from man" while "lacking proper knowledge of the social process" (392). As a result of this truncated reflection, "music...blamed itself and not society for this situation, thus remaining in the illusion that the isolation of music was itself an isolated matter, namely, that things could be corrected from the side of music alone with no change in society" (392). As Adorno emphasizes, the situation of music's "social alienation," which reformist tendencies disparage as "individualism" and "technical esotericism," is "a matter of social fact" and cannot be redressed within music alone but only through "the change of society." At this point, Adorno identifies the dialectical contribution that music can make toward such change, that is, the abolition of class domination:

Here and now music is able to do nothing but portray within its own structure the social antinomies which are also responsible for its isolation. Music will be better, the more deeply it is able to express—in the antinomies of its own formal language—the exigency of the social condition and to call for change through the coded language of suffering. It is not for music to stare in helpless horror at society: it fulfills its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws—problems which music contains within itself in the innermost cells of technique. The task of music as art thus enters into a parallel relationship to the task of social theory.<sup>44</sup>

Adorno is here developing an account of the dialectical (rather than immediate) relationship between music qua critical theory and revolutionary praxis in light of the fact that directly useful music offers only the "illusion of immediacy" characteristic of the commodity (394). This account is emphatically "materialist" in the sense that music is not said to enter into praxis directly as explicit instructions for what is to be done but insofar as it takes on "the character of cognition" by negotiating social problems unfolding at the level of its historically and socially determinate material:

Through its material, music must give clear form to the problems assigned it by this material, which is itself never purely natural material, but rather a social and historical product. Solutions offered by music in this process stand equal to theories. Social postulates are offered, the relationship of which to praxis might be, to be sure, extremely mediated and difficult or which, at any rate, cannot be realized without great difficulty. It is these postulates however which decide whether and how the entrance into social reality might be made. (393)

---

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music" 393.

Although the inner life of useless music is dead to society, to the extent that the general social function of music is that of commodity whose value is determined by use for the sake of exchange, such music, first off, gives form to or reflects the social antinomies responsible for its isolation in its immanent, material dynamics, and also, like critical social theory, expresses “an attitude toward these aporias,” providing social postulates that enter into a “highly mediated,” dialectical relation with revolutionary praxis (393–4). Adorno is not overly forthcoming about what he means with respect to isolated, avant-garde music’s mediated relation to praxis, but he does note that “resistance [to this music] seems to indicate that the dialectical function of this music is already perceptible in praxis, even if only as a negative force, as ‘destruction’” (394–5). Later writing offers additional elaboration. In “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” Adorno writes that Marx’s “critique of political economy lacks all concrete transitions to that praxis that...should constitute its *raison d'être*.” “The theory that is not conceived as an instruction for its realization,” he adds, “should have the most hope for realization.” Regarding the unmediated translation of theory into practice, Adorno notes what Robespierre and St. Just did with Rousseau’s theory of the general will.<sup>45</sup> He appears to be making the same point above, that functionlessness is a bulwark against the falsifying pressures of capitalism.

According to Adorno, critically self-reflexive music is “rejected” as “incomprehensible, esoteric-private, [and] thus reactionary” by those attached to a “romantic concept of musical immediacy” that sees “the empirical consciousness of present-day society...as the positive measure of a music no longer alienated but rather the property of free men” (394). But, Adorno argues, such music can do what “the current [empirical] consciousness of the masses” cannot, insofar as this state of consciousness is “suppressed and enchainied through class domination”—a point, Adorno later adds, that “no one has formulated...more exactly and extremely than Marx himself” (410). As we will see, Adorno’s musical materialism is not principally oriented around the psychologies of those involved musical production, reproduction, and consumption; instead, it focuses on how music takes on the character of critical self-reflexivity in the more impartial subject-object dialectic of its material. According to Adorno, this radical music that takes on the character of critical social theory does not merely “externalize a condition in art produced by class domination” but is “internally suited” to “the fixed goal of proletarian class struggle”—namely, the elimination of class domination (410–11).

---

<sup>45</sup> Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 277.

To grasp this *internal* suitability, we need to move into the hidden abode of musical production.

\* \* \*

The opening “Outline” is followed by a longer subsection called “Production” and a second, delimited section called “Reproduction/Consumption” (the form of the essay as a whole is thus bipartite: “Outline/Production” and “Reproduction/Consumption”). Adorno writes that “[the alienation of music from society] is tangible as an actual social fact in the relation of production to consumption.” “Reproduction,” he adds, “mediates between these two realms,” to the extent that production’s “demand for authenticity” and consumption’s “demand for comprehensibility” intermingle within it; in other words, intelligible musical reproduction applies both to the interpretation that makes manifest the “true meaning” embedded in a score as well as to the accessibility presupposed by consumption (411–12). Crucial here is Adorno’s specification that “consumption” is not simply another word for “listening” or “reception,” but a socially specific way of engaging with music qua commodity. In fact, Adorno states, “There simply is no such thing as the ‘consumption’ of new music.” By “new music,” Adorno means the critical but incomprehensible and thus unsalable music outlined at the start of the essay, that is, avant-garde, radical music of the type performed at concerts offered in the 20s and early 30s by the Internal Society for Contemporary Music, where “tickets [were] furnished to the audience gratis,” meaning such concerts were “economically totally unproductive” and “remain[ed] totally within the sphere of musical production” (420).

As Max Paddison states in his analysis of “On the Social Situation of Music”—an analysis that is, on the one hand, quite sensitive while, on the other, largely omitting Adorno’s political motivations—the essay’s first section on production communicates something “essential” about Adorno’s philosophy of music as a whole.<sup>46</sup> The importance of the “Production” section, as Adorno suggests (404–5), lies in its delimitation of the “location” of the problem of the mediation of music and society, spirit and world, superstructure and base (that the mediation of music and society is one of the essay’s principal concerns is clear from its first

---

<sup>46</sup> Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 97. In 10 pages, Paddison mentions class once and never discusses proletarian revolution or Adorno’s utopianism. The upshot is that it is unclear why Adorno is doing what he’s doing with respect to music. Similar things can be said regarding the helpful chapter on mediation that follows the analysis of “On the Social Situation of Music.”

sentence, which speaks of how all music of the essay's present clearly articulates society's contradictions and flaws).

This prioritization of the "dark interior," or hidden abode, of musical production with respect to the problem of mediation is a central element of Adorno's musical Marxism.<sup>47</sup> Adorno, like Marx of the first volume of *Capital*, approaches society from the inside of the production process: only the "inner core" of music qua product points back to the social world, according to Adorno—"mediation occurs in the matter itself."<sup>48</sup> For Adorno, the musical material and hence the sphere of musical production comprise the locus of the mediation of music and society to the extent that the musical material is the site of the progressive development of historically determinate techniques for the sake of avoiding the predominant norms of consumption. Although Adorno indicates in the 60s that his refusal to republish his first *ZfS* essay derives from a flaw in his initial conception of musical production, he maintains throughout his life a commitment to what he describes as a dialectically "objectivist" aesthetics (as opposed to a bourgeois "subjectivism"), and he takes issue with traditional sociology's focus on what sees as rather transparent matters of the distribution and consumption of music to the exclusion of the more obscure problems of musical production: such a sociology of music "remains imprisoned within the mechanisms of the market" and "gives its sanction to the primacy of the commodity character of music," measuring music's social effects via positivistic laboratory techniques when artworks of the highest social significance have no social effects and, as integrated aesthetic form, are more than their sensual particulars; furthermore, this sociological approach to music misunderstands capitalist domination, that the subjects whose reactions it takes as "objective data" are in fact "objects of society, not its substance."<sup>49</sup> We will

---

<sup>47</sup> Also see Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, "Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music," 9: "The path leading to their [the language and the form of music's] inner core is at the same time the only path leading to the discovery of their social significance." Also see Adorno, "Theses on the Sociology of Art," in *Without Model*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2023), 87 and 90.

<sup>49</sup> Adorno, "Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music," 6–7; Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 198; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 355; Adorno, "Theses on the Sociology of Art," 86. On "objectivist" versus "subjectivist" aesthetics, see the *Aesthetics* lectures. Adorno's dialectical objectivism is obviously deeply indebted to Hegel, whose aesthetics Adorno ultimately deems a failure even as it serves as his principal inspiration, but its less obvious source is the analytical approach of the Schoenberg School—for instance, a 1920 essay by his teacher Alban Berg called "The Musical Impotence of Hans Pfitzner's *Die neue Ästhetik*," which Adorno describes as "among the most significant essays on music," is so clearly a model for Adorno's aesthetic theory, to the extent that it argues for the objective, rational basis of music's quality. See Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, trans.

soon examine older Adorno's self-critique of "On the Social Situation of Music," but first we must elaborate how young Adorno "designates with greater precision" the problem of the mediation of music and society.

Adorno's investigation of musical production—which is to say bourgeois musical production<sup>50</sup>—proceeds via the division of "present-day musical activity" into two categories, which are described as torn halves of a "musical globe" that can never be made whole (395).<sup>51</sup> According to Adorno, "Music of the first category...takes place on the side of society; the second, on the side of music." To clarify, the first category consists of music that "unconditionally recognizes its commodity character and, refusing any dialectical intervention, orients itself to the demands of the market." The second, by contrast, "does not subordinate itself unconditionally to the law of the market."

Adorno writes that while this distinction may appear to correspond to that between "light" and "serious" music, "a great deal of 'serious' music adjusts itself to the demands of the market in the same manner as the composers of light music" and therefore "serves the market in disguise," even as "every effort is made to exempt 'serious music' from an alienation shared to an equal degree by Stravinsky's *Symphony of*

---

Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24 and 35–40.

<sup>50</sup> "The crude attribution of music to classes and groups is pure assertion and reverses all too easily into foolish pranks and agitation against 'formalism,' branding as bourgeois decadence everything that refuses to engage in the games of existing society and crowning the remnants of bourgeois composition, late-romantic sentimental plush, with the dignity of a people's democracy. To date, music has only existed as a product of the bourgeois class; a product that in its fractures and concrete configurations at once embodies the whole of society and registers it aesthetically. Feudalism scarcely produced its "own" music; rather, it always had it delivered by the urban bourgeoisie. And the proletariat, as a mere object of the domination of the whole of society, was prohibited from constituting itself as a musical subject by the repression that shaped its nature as well as by its position in the system: Only in the realization of freedom, freed of all manipulative management, would the proletariat achieve that subjectivity. In the given order of things, the existence of other than bourgeois music is dubious." Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 100. Also see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 168: "That this We [which art speaks] is, however, not socially univocal, that it is hardly that of a determinate class or social positions, has its origin perhaps in the fact that to this day art in the emphatic sense has only existed as bourgeois art; according to Trotsky's thesis, no proletarian art is conceivable, only socialist art."

<sup>51</sup> See Adorno's famous March, 18 1936 letter to Benjamin: "'Les extrêmes me touchent,' just as they touch you—but only if the dialectic of the lowest has the same value as the dialectic of the highest, rather than the latter simply decaying. Both bear the stigmata of capitalist, both contain elements of change (but never, of course, the middle-term between Schoenberg and the American film). Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up." In Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 123.

*Psalms* and the latest hit song of Robert Solz” (395–6). This line of argument begins to provide some insight into the musics that fall under the first category, while also complicating the familiar charge against Adorno of elitism (a charge that will be addressed in more detail in forthcoming portions of this project).

Among the instances of “light” or “vulgar” music Adorno notes in the “Reproduction/Consumption” section are the “hit song” (in addition to the tunes of the Viennese operetta composer Robert Stolz, Adorno also notes, for instance, Paul Raasch’s 1927 beer-hall sensation “Trink, trink, Brüderlein trink”<sup>52</sup>); he also mentions, at the more upmarket end of the spectrum, “literature for male chorus” and “sophisticated jazz,” the latter of which is described as “the upper bourgeois form of vulgar music” (425, 430). But to emphasize genre would perhaps be to miss the point made manifest by the inclusion in the first category of “serious” music, by which Adorno means not only more affirmative art music of the essay’s present but also classics by Wagner and Puccini that comprise the core of the bourgeois canon. In “Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music,” written between the *ZfS* essay and the *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Adorno states that “[the distinction between high and low art established by antiquity] proves nothing else than the failure of all cultures that have ever existed hitherto.”<sup>53</sup> The principal issue that Adorno seems to take in “On the Social Situation of Music” with music of the first category is that it affirms this failure, that it “ideologically” satisfies “the actual need that lies at the basis of bourgeois musical consumption” with the aim of “thwarting change within society” (421). With respect to thwarting change, Adorno again gestures toward the stalling of rationalization, to that passive sensuous enjoyment that he later describes as the deeply entrenched effect of the identification of cultural consumption with leisure time, that is, the proscription of effort for the sake of reproduction of labor power. By ideological satisfaction, he means music of the first category installs itself in place of the happiness denied by capitalism. Adorno expands on this point in the culture industry chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

<sup>52</sup> Adorno also references this hit in *The Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 45, where he describes it as offering the “alcoholic bliss” that music in general has come to stand for, “a fraudulent promise of happiness which, instead of happiness, installs itself.”

<sup>53</sup> “Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music,” 13. In Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 225, he makes a similar point: “The antithesis of productive forces and relations of production becomes flagrant in the dichotomy [between serious and light music]: the productive forces are pushed into the upper, quasi-privileged sphere, are isolated, and are thus a piece of the wrong consciousness even where they represent the right one.”

"works of art are ascetic and shameless," preserving the promise of happiness by presenting fulfillment in its mutilation; "the culture industry is pornographic and prudish," cheating consumers out of true happiness by substituting immediate gratification for the aesthetic sublimation on which the encounter with social truth and thus change are predicated.<sup>54</sup> In short, Adorno writes in "On the Social Situation," music from category one hides "social misery and contradiction" rather than "translating [social contradictions] into form and cognition regarding the structure of society" (421).

In Adorno's elaboration of the second category of musical activity, he takes us into musical production's hidden abode. Adorno begins this descent by dividing musical production that does not serve the market and that expresses alienation in four subcategories. This critical music consists of (1) the autonomous music of the Schoenberg School (Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern), which resembles "the monad of Leibniz," insofar as "without consciousness of its social location or indifference to it," this music "crystallizes" social antinomies immanently in its musical material; (2) the "objectivist" music of Stravinsky (and also Bartók), which "recognizes the fact of alienation as its own isolation" but does so "only within itself" and thus "without respect for actual society"—accordingly, it turns to "stylistic forms of the past" ("neo-classicism" in "highly capitalistic-industrial nations" and "folklore" in "underdeveloped, agrarian counties") and tries "to evoke the image of a non-existent 'objective' society"; (3) a surrealistic "hybrid form"—represented by Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* ("his best and most exposed [piece]" [406]) and the works Weil wrote with Brecht—which "proceeds" (like Stravinsky's reactionary objectivism) "from the cognition of alienation," while (in contrast to this objectivism) "[denying]...the positive solution" and "permitting social flaws to manifest themselves by means of a flawed invoice which defines itself as illusory with no attempt at camouflage through attempts at an aesthetic totality"; and (4) the *Gebrauchsmusik* of Hindemith and (the less commercial and more laudable) *Gemeinschaftsmusik* of Eisler, which together comprise a type of music that "attempts to break through alienation from within itself, even at expense of its immanent form" (396–7).

For reasons that are no doubt becoming clear, the heart of Adorno's theory of mediation and its political significance lies in his account of Schoenberg's music (including its relation to Stravinsky's). Therefore, this discussion will limit itself to the first two forms of critical musical

---

<sup>54</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 111.

production in Adorno's taxonomy (and largely to the first). According to Adorno, Schoenberg is to be regarded, like Freud and Karl Krauss, as one of the "dialectical phenomena of bourgeois individualism... which work in their supposedly 'specialized' areas of problems without respect for a presupposed social totality": "in these areas... they achieve solutions which suddenly change and turn unnoticed against the prerequisites of individualism; such solutions are in principle denied to a socially oriented bourgeois reformism which must pay for its insights, aimed as they are at the totality but never reaching the basis thereof, with 'mediating' and consequently camouflaging machinations" (397). In other words, Adorno positions Schoenberg's work, along with that of Freud and Krauss, in opposition to "a socially oriented bourgeois reformism" that obscures the totality it seeks to redress. This is to say that he positions them politically, on the side of truth for the sake of something more than mere reformism.

Just as Freud only arrives at "an objective dialectic of human consciousness in history" through "the analysis of individual consciousness and subconsciousness," Schoenberg's music reveals the "basis [of totality]" to the extent that the composer pursues the immanent consequences of "expressive music of the private bourgeois individual" to the extreme. By seeking complete conscious disposal over the musical material, total freedom from every heteronomous element, such that every musical moment refers only to itself, Schoenberg transforms music into something altogether different than the conventional autonomous artwork—a new kind of radically independent work, one with absolutely no social function, "which even severs the last communication with the listener," but which is also entirely without the illusion or semblance of self-sufficiency or freedom from mediation by society (397, 400).<sup>55</sup> This obviously recalls the opening antinomy of "On the Social Situation of Music." As Adorno formulates this antinomy in *Philosophy of New Music*, written eight years after his first *ZfS* essay, the process through which bourgeois music overcomes every heteronomous convention and isolates itself from society, thereby securing its capacity to cognize social reality, is also a hollowing out of its meaning—"a kind of second order vacuity is announced, not dissimilar to Hegel 'unhappy consciousness': 'But this self has freed content by means of its emptiness.'"<sup>56</sup> The comparison to the unhappy consciousness of the *Phenomenology* is obviously not a celebration; and Adorno is not advocating for the music of Schoenberg

<sup>55</sup> Also see Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 36.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 40.

School in the sense of urging more people to appreciate its significance. Rather, Adorno is arguing that the capacity of music to illuminate the social world ("monopoly capitalism") is tied up with its incomprehensibility, the upshot of which is that "no one, neither individuals or groups, wants to have anything to do with it."<sup>57</sup> It precisely this contradiction, according to Adorno, that makes Schoenberg's music valuable critical theory for communism.

Returning to "On the Social Situation of Music," Adorno emphasizes that is not Schoenberg the subject *per se* who makes the music he produces critical. Even though Schoenberg's composition is perhaps the first example where consciousness has "seized control of [the natural material of music]," it is not, Adorno writes, produced "out of pure spirit" (398). "It is much rather a dialectic in the strictest sense," a movement "situated in the material itself." According to Adorno, it is precisely in this dialectic of the musical material, wherein music's exterior alienation (its separation from society) is perfected, that it overcomes its alienation inwardly and offers some measure of reconciliation between subject and object, individual and universality, freedom and planning (400).

The Schoenberg section of *Philosophy of New Music* (largely written in 1941) contains perhaps the most thorough general account of the dialectical movement of the musical material, which it might be helpful to review before elaborating the more elliptical rendering in "On the Social Situation of Music." It is worth noting that despite the Hegel epigraphs at the start of every major section of that book, Adorno announces in the introduction that his method is "precisely" a Marxian one, insofar as it turns the dialectic "from its head onto its feet," and what's more, he draws a parallel between Schoenberg's music and Hegelian Marxism: "By assimilating the direction of music from Beethoven to Brahms, Schoenberg's music can lay claim to the legacy of classical bourgeois music much as the materialist dialectic relates back to Hegel."<sup>58</sup>

As indicated above, Adorno's "musical material" is difficult to define. It is not raw, "physicalistic" sonorousness, independent of history and society. According to Adorno, it is more like "speech" than "the inventory of sounds."<sup>59</sup> It is "the material language of the age."<sup>60</sup> With respect to Viennese classicism of the late eighteenth century, the material comprises tonality, the tempered tuning system, the possibility of modulation through the complete circle of fifths, sonata form, antecedent-consequent

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 23 and 47.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," 281.

phrasing, and so on. The more the constitutive moments of the material bear historical necessity in themselves and demand exactitude with regard to the handling of their historical implications, the more they take on the appearance of nature.<sup>61</sup> The dialectical movement Adorno has in mind is an immanent dynamic between the composing consciousness and the socially “preformed” material at their disposal, which is also an immanent dynamic between said consciousness and society in the epoch in which it is composing. In the 1934 essay “The Dialectical Composer,” Adorno writes that composition is not *creatio ex nihilo*; rather, the composer is to the material as Oedipus is to Sphinx—a solver of riddles whose origin is not merely subjective.<sup>62</sup> Here’s a longer excerpt that conveys what Adorno has in mind, particularly with respect to the moment of “new music”:

The exigencies of the material imposed on the subject arise...from the fact that the 'material' is itself sedimented spirit, preformed socially by human consciousness. This objective spirit of the material, as erstwhile and self-forgotten subjectivity, has its own laws of movement. Of the same origin as the social process and ever and again laced through by its traces, what seems to be strictly the motion of the material itself moves in the same direction as does real society even where neither knows anything of the other and where each combats the other. Therefore the composer's struggle with the material is a struggle with society precisely to the extent that society has migrated into the work, and as such it is not pitted against the production as something purely external and heteronomous, as against a consumer or an opponent. In immanent reciprocation, directives are constituted that the material imposes on the composer and that the composer transforms by adhering to them....He is no creator. Society and the era in which he lives constrains him not externally but in the rigorous demand for correctness made on him by the composition. The state of technique presents itself to him as a problem in every measure that he dares to think: In every measure technique as a whole demands of him that he do it justice and give the one right answer that technique in that moment permits. Compositions are nothing but such answers, nothing but the solution of technical puzzles, and the composer is the only one who knows how to decipher them and understand his music. What he does is located in the infinitely small. It is accomplished in the execution of what his music objectively demands from him. But for such obedience the composer requires all possible disobedience, all independence and spontaneity. The movement of the musical material is just that dialectical.<sup>63</sup>

Adorno’s principal example of the dialectical movement of the musical material in the emergence of twelve-tone technique or dodecaphony from free atonality in Schoenberg’s composition. An adequate account

---

<sup>61</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Adorno, “The Dialectical Composer,” in *Essays on Music*, 205.

<sup>63</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 32–4.

of this example involves distinguishing what Adorno says about it in "On the Social Situation" from what he says about it in *Philosophy of New Music* and in his Kranichstein lectures of the 50s and 60s, one of which was the basis of the famous essay on *musique informelle* or informal music. The interpretive situation is tricky insofar as there are clearly differences between the texts, which span four decades of ongoing thinking, but making sense of any given text requires all of them, since each deals with the same of themes in a more or less elliptical manner and thus calls for supplementation from its close cousins. As Adorno often points out in his lectures, he avoids definition, since he understands himself to be describing historical tendencies in a state of becoming. Instead, he seeks to elaborate what something means through the totality of what he says about it, asking interpreters to "take on the labor of the concept."<sup>64</sup>

Let's begin with the prime illustration of the dialectical movement of the musical material that Adorno provides in "On the Social Situation of Music". According to Adorno, "the productive force" that initiates the movement entails a "psychic drive... toward undisguised and inhibited expression" that is confronted by the "objective problem" of how "material that has achieved the highest technical development" (the material bequeathed to Schoenberg by Wagner and Brahms) could submit itself to such "radical expression" (398). According to Adorno, "it must surrender all alleged connections and obligations which stand in the way of freedom of movement of individual expression; these connections are the reflections of an 'agreement' of bourgeois society with the psyche of the individual which is now renounced by the sufferings of the individual." In the case of the most technically advanced music Schoenberg inherited, the obligations impeding free expression are apparently the remaining obligations to the traditional diatonic system of 24 major and minor keys (tonality) that persist in Wagner's technique of chromatic sequence and Brahms's diatonic technique of variation—namely, the demands for what Adorno terms structural and harmonic "symmetry" and "ornamentation." Adorno writes that in the works of the middle period of free atonality (e.g., *Erwartung*, *Die glückliche Hand*, and *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*), Schoenberg uses dissonance as the "vehicle of the radical principle of expression"—as the expression of the pain of the individual vis-à-vis society—breaking down both orthodox tonality's "tectonic symmetrical relations" and its correlative triadic harmony. As previously noted, the account is elliptical, but Adorno does mention the emancipation of counterpoint from the homophonic constraints of

---

<sup>64</sup> Adorno, *The New Music Kranichstein Lectures*, 236.

diatonicism, by which he apparently means (as he writes in *Philosophy of New Music*) that the more dissonant a chord becomes, the more the distinction between its essential and inessential (merely ornamental) notes breaks down, meaning the more all its constituent notes become equal and independent polyphonic voices.<sup>65</sup> In *Philosophy of New Music*, as well as in later writing, he also describes how once subjectivizing dissonance becomes “the technical organon” of “omnipresent construction,” the technique through which the musical material is scrupulously rationalized into integral wholes, the distinction between inessential transition and essential formal elements breaks down—“in all its elements, such a music is equally near the midpoint.”<sup>66</sup> Before moving on to the emergence of twelve-tone technique from free atonality, Adorno clarifies that designating the latter “expressionism,” with its emphasis on the moment of subjectivity, is misleading, since the process described above really is a dialectical movement where “subjective-expressive achievement” is also “the resolution of objective-material contradictions”: “every gesture with which [Schoenberg] intervenes in the material configuration is at the same time an answer to questions directed to him by the material in the form of its own immanent problems” (399).

Adorno now turns to the social significance of Schoenberg’s “esoteric” music, writing that the consequences of the handed-down material problems Schoenberg follows to their logical conclusion in the serial compositions of his third period make manifest “the problems of society that produced this material and in which the contradictions of this society are defined as technical problems” (399). Adorno notes Schoenberg’s “replacement within all his works, in spite and because of his own expressive origins, of any private fortuitousness which might have been viewed quite correctly as a type of anarchic musical production with an objective principle of order which is never imposed upon the material from the exterior, but rather extracted from the material itself and brought into a relationship with it by means of an historical process of rational transparency.” In other words, Schoenberg qua composing consciousness, in trying to overcome the repressions of conventional tonality (a problem to which he is directed by the “preformed” material he has inherited), must avoid “private fortuitousness”—the uncalculated, instinctive, arbitrary, and so ultimately unfree repetition of a note that gives the sense of a tonal center within the diatonic system—and it precisely this radical subjection of the musical material to the power

---

<sup>65</sup> See Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 49.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 49–50.

of expression that extinguishes expression in the form of the twelve-tone system, where no note can be repeated until the other 11 are heard first. Put differently, "subjective criticism of instances of ornamentation and repetition leads to an objective, non-expressive structure which, in place of symmetry and repetition, determines the exclusion of repetition within the cell."

Now Adorno offers two readings of the dynamic through which dodecaphony emerges, or rather he clarifies that this dynamic contains two moments—the moment of "the musical style of freedom" and the moment of "the reversal into unfreedom." The latter is bit more straightforward. As Adorno puts it in the eponymous section of *Philosophy of New Music*, Schoenberg, in trying to overcome the heteronomy of the tonal system by following the immanent consequences of the material bequeathed to him, produces a new heteronomous dodecaphonic system. Put differently, a new system, "alien" to the individual and characterized by "administrative domination over the whole," proceeds from the historical tendencies of the musical material that direct the composer toward radically free expression.<sup>67</sup> In short, the conscious disposal over the material becomes a blind determination of the material. Here's how Adorno, puts it, in a passage that reads like a critique of Kant's moral philosophy:

[Twelve-tone technique] subjugates music by setting it free. The subject rules over the music by means of a rational system in order to succumb to this rational system itself....Whereas this freedom [the freedom of the composer] is achieved in its disposal over the material, it becomes a determination of the material, a determination that confronts the subject as something alien and in turn subordinates the subject to its constraints....The subject disclaims its own spontaneity by projecting onto the historical subject matter the rational experiences that it had in its confrontation with it. The operations that broke the blind domination of the sonorous material become, through a system of rules, a blind second nature. To this the subject subordinates itself in search of protection and security, despairing of being able to fulfill the music on its own. Wagner's precept of establishing rules for oneself and then following them reveals its fateful aspect. No rule is more repressive than the one that is self-promulgated.<sup>68</sup>

In this passage, one can clearly see why Adorno refers to *Philosophy of New Music* as "a detailed excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*".<sup>69</sup> To rehearse the latter book's argument, enlightenment or progressive

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 54-5.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 5.

rationalization (that is, the mastery of nature on the basis of fear) seeks to seize everything in its regulatory grasp, which yields not freedom but the domination of a blind second nature of pure identity—in short, the reproduction of life with fear. As Horkheimer and Adorno succinctly put it, “In the mastery of nature, without which mind does not exist, enslavement to nature persists.”<sup>70</sup> True enlightenment or enlightenment in its “positive” conception (that is, progress qua the actualization of freedom and “the elimination of fear”) can only be achieved by giving mutilated nature a voice. This requires a change in the structure of society, since the exigencies of accumulation reduce everything in human and extra-human nature into practical objects of fear-based self-preservation, into use-values that serve exchange-value.

Adorno’s later work emphasizes that there is more to Schoenberg’s dialectic of the musical material than its embodiment of the social dialectic of enlightenment, even in *Philosophy of New Music*. From “On the Social Situation” to his later writing, Adorno refers to the dynamic that culminates in what Schoenberg called (apparently in resistance to heteronomous systematization) “composition with twelve notes” as *Musikstil der Freiheit* or “musical style of freedom,” a turn of phrase coined by the Czech microtonal composer Alois Hába in 1925.<sup>71</sup> In a 1961 lecture and subsequent essay on *musique informelle* or informal music, Adorno responds to the “aging of new music”—its reduction of the musical material to an “abstract,” “alien” order (the twelve-tone system or technique) rigidly opposed to the subject and so bereft of the subject-object dialectic that gives music the character of critical cognition and its capacity to express suffering. Adorno proposes a post-serial program of composition that clarifies what the musical style of freedom entails musically and politically. To be sure, he does not call for a return to the free atonality of the “heroic decade” of 1910–20, but rather an approach to the musical material that is akin to early Schoenberg’s precisely to the extent that it follows the historical tendencies of the material inaugurated by the postwar predominance of twelve-tone technique.

Adorno describes informal music as an “anticipation” of “utopia” that “cannot be fulfilled in the world we inhabit,” something “a little like Kant’s eternal peace”—a “concrete possibility” whose realization is doubtful.<sup>72</sup> In other words, informal music is rendered as a reconciliation of freedom and planning, subject and object, particular

---

<sup>70</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 31.

<sup>71</sup> Adorno, “On the Social Situation of Music,” 400; Adorno, “The Prehistory of Serial Music,” in *Sound Figures*, 62; Adorno, *The New Music Kranichstein Lectures*, 237.

<sup>72</sup> Adorno, *The New Music Kranichstein Lectures*, 272.

and universal that points toward communism. In contrast to twelve-tone music—"capitulation to an invoked order" and the organization of freedom according to an "alien yardstick which mutilates everything that strives to shape itself in freedom"—informal music would entail "immanent, transparent laws that spring from freedom."<sup>73</sup> According to Adorno this freedom would involve neither the rigid opposition of pure subjectivity and thing-like objectivity nor that of freedom and control:

His technical forces of production [those of the subjectivity at work in art] are the immanent function of the material; only by following the latter's lead does he gain any power over it. By means of such a process of exteriorization, however, it receives back a universality which goes beyond the individuation of the particular producer. Labor on the work of art is always social labor. It is this that legitimates the talk of artistic rationality. Where there are grounds for asserting that a composer has composed well, such universal subjectivity will have proved itself, as will reason as a positive, a logic that goes beyond the particular by satisfying its desiderata.<sup>74</sup>

If art really desires to revoke the domination of nature, and if it is concerned with a situation in which men abandon their efforts to exercise control through their intellect, they can only achieve this through the domination of nature. Only music which is control of itself would be in control of its own freedom from every compulsion, even its own. This would be on the analogy with the argument that only in a rationally organized society would the elimination of scarcity lead to the disappearance of organization as a form of oppression. In a *musique informelle* the deformation of rationalism which exists today would be abolished and converted to a true rationality. Only what is fully articulated in art provides the image of an unreformed and hence free humanity. The work of art which is fully articulated, thanks to its maximum control of its material, and which therefore find itself at the furthest possible remove from organic existence, is also as close to the organic as is at all possible.<sup>75</sup>

Central to these passages is Adorno's later understanding of "the idea of art," and thus of the *successful* artwork, which will be discussed in more detail below. In line with his rendering of the "positive" concept of enlightenment and negative dialectics, this idea consists of a moment of integration, sublimation, construction, etc. (that is, exacting incorporation of layers of material into a lawful aesthetic form through uncompromising rationalization or the progressive domination of the material) as well as a moment resistance to that process.

We are now in a position to return to "On the Social Situation." With

<sup>73</sup> Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," 292–3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 318–19.

the “Outline” and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in mind, it would seem that the social significance of the emergence of serial music is simply that it instantiates the dialectic of enlightenment. Schoenberg’s music gives form to the contradictions of capitalist society precisely through the resistance to social conventions that makes it uncommunicative, to the extent that such resistance reproduces the world against which it rebels. On this reading, Schoenberg’s achievement lies in the truth of the dialectic of enlightenment revealed by his failure to immanently overcome the aporias of music as if they were technical problems with technical solutions rather than contradictions rooted in the structure of society (neither music nor philosophy, Adorno often writes, can realize itself, since they are entangled in social forces that conflict with what they desire and make them impotent).

The issue with concluding the matter here is that this account is not exactly how “On the Social Situation” describes Schoenberg’s composition with respect to the promises of the “Outline.” As it states, “Radical freedom from all objective norms imposed upon music from the exterior is coordinated with the most extreme rigidity of immanent structure, so that music by its forces eliminates at least within itself alienation as a matter of subjective formation and objective material. Music thus moves toward that for which Alois Hába coined the beautiful expression ‘musical style of freedom.’ To be sure, Adorno adds, music overcomes inward alienation only through the perfected expression thereof on its exterior” (399–400). So the example of the emergence of twelve-tone technique from free atonality is apparently supposed to reveal that the situation of music in capitalism is such that the overcoming of the hardened oppositions of subject to object and particularity to universality within the musical material intensifies music’s opposition to society and that redressing this painful impasse, where harmony takes the form of hated, ugly, and foreign discordance, would require a transformation of the relationship between musical forces and relations of production.

Adorno opposes this successful failure of the Schoenberg School, defined principally by its complete “absence of illusion,” to the composition of Stravinsky’s School, which attempts to imperiously correct the inward alienation of music without pursuing the immanent dialectic of the material, that is, by regressing to pre-bourgeois forms that are deceptively affirmed as “an original natural state of music” (403). To the extent that the goal of Stravinsky’s “objectivism” is a “musical anthropology appropriate to the being of man,” and insofar as its musical material is shaped by merely the “inclination” or “taste” of the composer and not guided by a rational relation to a “structural immanence,” a “social

analogy" rooted in illusion suggests itself: "it appears that the sovereign composer stands in free control of the supposed musical organism, in much the same way that in fascism a *Führerelite* appears to be in control, while in truth power over the social 'organism' lies in the hands of monopoly capitalism" (404).

Before moving to Adorno's self-critique of this account, it should be emphasized (if it is not already crystal clear) that the link between musical production and Marx's hidden abode in Adorno's oeuvre as a whole is more than a matter of superficial correspondence vis-à-vis obscurity (despite what one might be led to believe by Gillian Rose's and Martin Jay's general assessments of the tenuous relation between Adorno's critical theory and Marx's critique of political economy<sup>76</sup>). As Adorno specifies in both the 1962 summer lecture on "Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory" and the 1969 introduction to *The Positivist Dispute*, Marx's critique, particularly with respect to the secret of surplus value lying within the shadowy sphere of production, centers on the contradictory dynamic of exchange governing bourgeois society, wherein exchange proceeds both justly and unjustly, with equality and without.<sup>77</sup> Closely linked with the concept of "identity," Adorno's

<sup>76</sup> See Chris O'Kane, "Introduction to 'Theodor W. Adorno on Marx and the basic concepts of sociological theory': From a Seminar Transcript in the Summer Semester of 1962," in *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Werner Bonefeld and Chris O'Kane (London: Bloomsbury, 2022). The following analysis of Adorno's theory of the exchange principle is indebted to O'Kane's research.

<sup>77</sup> "Liberal theory is confronted with its own claim with regard to the act of exchange. You say that equivalents are exchanged, that there is a free and just exchange, I take your word, now we shall see how this turns out! This is immanent critique. That the human [*Mensch*] becomes a commodity has been perceived by others. Marx: 'These petrified conditions must be made to dance by singing to them their own melody' ('Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'). Not: to confront capitalist society with a different one, but: to ask if society conforms to its own rules, if society functions according to laws which it claims as its own. Now, Marx does not just say, no, this is wrong, but he takes the dialectic seriously and does not just flirt with its terminology. In an exchange, something is both equal and unequal; it is and at the same time is not above-board. The theory of liberalism conforms to its own concept and by conforming it also contradicts its own concept. The exchange-relation is, in reality, preformed by class relations: that there is an unequal control of the means of production: that is the heart of the theory." Adorno, "Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory," in *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, 245.

"[The work of Marx] is called the critique of political economy since it attempts to derive the whole that is to be criticized in terms of its right to existence from exchange, commodity form and its immanent 'logical' contradictory nature. The assertion of the equivalence of what is exchanged, the basis of all exchange, is repudiated by its consequences. As the principle of exchange, by virtue of its immanent dynamics, extends to the living labours of human beings it changes compulsively into objective inequality, namely that of social classes. Forcibly stated, the contradiction is that exchange takes place justly and unjustly."

“exchange relationship” [*Tauschverhältnis*] not only points to exchange-value and thus to the fungibility or equivalence of incommensurable use-values, but also to domination on both the level of capitalist class relations and that of the capitalist system as a whole. In order to grasp the concept of surplus-value, Adorno writes, one must not begin with the commodity produced by the worker but with the exchange process that is not just a matter of circulation but also of production:

The worker sells his labour-time for which he receives his equivalent. But the time he gives and the time that is needed for the reproduction of his labour-power are different....Here lies the source of surplus-value without having to consider the commodity produced. One exchanges the same for the same and simultaneously the same for the not-same. Behind this lies the entirety of class relations. Only because the worker has nothing else but his labour-power does he accept these conditions.<sup>78</sup>

Put differently, exchange, Adorno writes, is an objective “mediating conceptuality” immanent to the social activity of relating of “the same with the same to the same”—i.e., “the moment of calculatory equation [founding] the difference between bourgeois society and feudalism”—which is nonetheless “preformed” by class relations (the unequal control of the means of production).<sup>79</sup> He describes this mediating conceptuality not as an ordering concept under which knowing subjects subsume their objects economically, but as an abstraction that has been endowed with a quasi-independent, quasi-objective will—a “law” produced by social subjects that nonetheless has great “power/violence” [*Gewalt*] over them (taking on the appearance of “fate”) precisely to the extent its origin is not consciousness but “the universal development of the exchange system itself,” a system of production for exchange fueled by the surplus-value producing labor of a dispossessed class.<sup>80</sup> As Adorno writes with respect to this domination by the spectral movement of an objective abstraction that the dominated unknowingly produce, “Society obeys this conceptuality *tel quel*, and it provides the objectively valid model for all essential social events. This conceptuality is independent both of the consciousness of the human beings subjected to it and of the consciousness of the scientists....Nothing is more powerful than the conceptual mediation which conjures up before human beings the being-

Adorno, “Introduction,” in, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976), 25.

<sup>78</sup> Adorno, “Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory,” in *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, 248–9.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute*, 13. 80; “Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory,” 243.

for-another as an in-itself and prevents them from becoming conscious of the conditions under which they live.”<sup>81</sup>

So what does this have to do with Adorno’s account of the musical material in the 30s and 40s? As early as the 1940s Adorno links the exchange principle mediating capitalism as a “negative totality” (a false whole) with the dialectic of enlightenment that Schoenberg’s composition instantiates. Later, in the 1964 essay “Progress” (which is excerpted from the *History and Freedom* lectures), Adorno writes, “Bourgeois society created the concept of progress, and the convergence of the concept with the negation of progress originates in the principle governing society, namely the principle of exchange.”<sup>82</sup> The bourgeois “pretext” of equal or fair exchange—“the rational form of mythical ever-sameness” which, as noted above, Adorno calls identity—implies the stasis of social actions cancelling each other out. According to Adorno, progress originates in the fact that fair exchange is a lie, that “the justice that amounts to a repetition of sameness is unmasked as injustice and perpetual inequality.” But progress cannot realize the demand of true equality or identity inherent in the exchange principle inasmuch as the stasis of the lie of equality is constitutive of capitalism. As Adorno puts it in *Notes to Literature*, “As long as equality reigns as law, the individual is cheated of equality.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, so long as the lie of fair exchange persists as law in the appropriation of surplus-value, the pursuit of equality will reproduce inequality. If the exchange principle were abstractly denied without structural change, Adorno adds in *Negative Dialectics*, it would mean “the recidivism of ancient injustice”: that is, “the rationality which is inherent in the exchange principle—as ideology, of course, but also as a promise—would give way to direct appropriation, to force, and nowadays to the naked privilege of monopolies and cliques.”<sup>84</sup> The only answer to the problem is the actualization of the unfulfilled promise in the law of equality, that is, the latter’s abolition—the rationalization of society that eliminates the necessity of scarcity which compels workers to exchange their labor-power for wages. In sum, then, Adorno’s account of musical production via the dialectical musical material of Schoenberg’s composition—where the rationalization of nature in accordance with the principle of identity reproduces the life of fear, or the domination of nature, which it seeks to overcome—instantiates the same principle

<sup>81</sup> Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute*, 80–1.

<sup>82</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 170–1.

<sup>83</sup> Adorno, “On the Classicism on Goethe’s *Iphigenie*,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 165.

<sup>84</sup> “On the Dialectics of Identity,” in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146–7.

of exchange that animates Marx's hidden abode.<sup>85</sup> In other words, not only does the total social process appear "conceptlessly" (rather than "photographically") in Schoenberg's composition, but the latter seems, in ways that are still not entirely clear, to "take a position on society" by giving form negatively to the reconciliation it cannot offer.<sup>86</sup>

\* \* \*

We are now in a position to investigate Adorno's self-critique of this initial presentation of musical materialism, which is to say, the mediation of music and society. In his "Postscript" to *The Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, which follows a dazzling final chapter on "Mediation," Adorno writes, "The social question about the relation of productive forces and relations of production can be applied to musical sociology without doing violence to it."<sup>87</sup> The musical forces and relations of production do not merely oppose each other, Adorno emphasizes, but interact reciprocally, meaning public taste can be shaped by musical productions just as relations of production can shackle the forces of production (as in the case of the compulsion to adjust to market pressures and suppress what the artistic material demands). According to Adorno, when the relations of production gain primacy over the forces of production, as they do in late capitalism, music is ideological. Echoing ideas developed in the 1968 essay "Industrial Society or Late Capitalism?", Adorno adds that historically relations of production have not only fettered forces of production but also enhanced them. Indeed, Adorno continues:

Antitraditionalist qualities... were as much elicited by the bourgeois music market as they later were socially limited in the course of the historical dialectic to which the bourgeoisie itself was subject, and finally revoked

---

<sup>85</sup> Also see Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 41–2: "Society as it exists cannot unfold from its own principle but must amalgamate with precapitalist, archaic ones. If it were to realize its own principle without "noncapitalist" admixtures heterogeneous to it, it would be voiding itself. In a society that has been functionalized virtually through and through, totally ruled by the exchange principle, lack of function comes to be a secondary function. In the function of functionlessness, truth and ideology entwine. What results from it is the autonomy of the work of art itself: in the context of social effects, the man-made in-itself of a work that will not sell out to that context promises something that would exist without defacement by the universal profit. That something is nature. At the same time, however, profit takes the functionless into its service and thereby degrades it to meaninglessness and irrelevancy. The exploitation of something useless in itself, something sealed and superfluous to the people on whom it is foisted—this is the ground of the fetishism that covers all cultural commodities, and the musical ones in particular. It is tuned to conformism."

<sup>86</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 209 and 215

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 219.

under totalitarian regimes. Even the autonomy of great music, the means of its most emphatic opposition to the dictates of the marketplace, would hardly have evolved otherwise than via the marketplace. Musical forms, even constitutive modes of musical reaction, are internalizations of social forms. Like all art, music is as much a social fact as an inner self-shaping, a self-liberation from immediate social desiderata. The freedom of art, its independence of the demands made on it, is founded on the idea of a free society and in a sense anticipates its realization. (221)

It is at this point that Adorno launches his self-critique, in a footnote appended to “the sphere of production” in the first sentence of the following paragraph:

This is why the sphere of production is not simply a basis for musical sociology as the sphere of production is a basis for the process of material living. As a matter of the mind, musical production is itself socially mediated, not something immediate. Strictly speaking, the only part of it that is a productive force is the spontaneity that is inseparable from the mediations. From the social point of view it would be the force that exceeds mere repetition of the relations of production as represented by types and species. Such spontaneity may harmonize with the social trend, as in the young Beethoven or in Schubert's songs; or it may offer resistance, as Bach and again the new music of today do, to submission of the market. The question to be raised is this: How is musical spontaneity socially possible at all? For it always contains social productive forces whose real forms society has not yet absorbed.<sup>88</sup>

The footnote reads:

The writer's error in his essay “Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik,” published in 1932 in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, was his flat identification of the concept of musical production with the precedence of the economic sphere of production, without considering how far that which we call [musical] production already presupposes social production and depends on it as much as it is sundered from it. This alone has kept the writer from reissuing that essay, the draft of a finished musical sociology.

Analyses of this material by Max Paddison and Gillian Rose provide crucial introductions to key terms and germane sources.<sup>89</sup> Both also register the elusiveness of Adorno's self-critique. Indeed, Rose (to whom Paddison refers perplexed readers in an endnote) seems somewhat flummoxed herself, offering a rather cursory treatment that, in lieu of setting the riddle in motion, repeatedly refers to it as “odd” and leaves it mired in mystery. But despite the slipperiness of the self-critique, it clearly does not sanction insinuation that Adorno's reluctance to republish his

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 221–222.

<sup>89</sup> Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 121–128; Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (London: Verso, 2013), 153–156.

1932 essay stems from a turn away from the theoretical and political tradition represented by Marx, Engels, and Lenin.<sup>90</sup> To the contrary, the self-critique is part of an ongoing process of refining a materialist dialectic of theory and praxis for the sake of communism.

Considering the footnote in isolation from its wider contexts, the problem seems to be a relatively straightforward one (straightforward, that is, if one could in fact find evidence of the crime in "On the Social Situation of Music"). Adorno's footnote is concerned with his portrayal of the relationship between a special sphere of musical production that made itself independent from the sphere of production in general. This concern appears to involve the representation of the relationship between matter and mind, society and spirit, infrastructure and superstructure. The crime seems to lie principally in "identification." As early as the introduction to *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno explicitly repudiates procedures "enmeshed with the inclination to take side with the whole" and writes that a dialectical method that is faithful to Marxism (that is, one "turned from its head onto its feet") cannot "[treat] particular phenomena as illustrations of examples of something preexisting and exempt from the movement of the concept."<sup>91</sup> In a great many later texts, he elaborates further: often citing Marx's contention that superstructure and base do not move in tandem, he writes that to entirely reduce cultural production to the social production of goods in general, and thus to reduce cultural products to ideology, amounts not only to an untruth on par with the absolutizing of art's independence from the laws governing commodity production for the marketplace, but also to a redoubling of the naturalizing domination of the capitalist system, an affirmation of the impossibility of escaping "the almighty production process."<sup>92</sup> As Adorno puts it in "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?": "Dialectical theory that reflects on itself critically may not make itself at home in the medium of the universal. To break out of that medium is indeed its intention."<sup>93</sup> In sum, then, it would seem that Adorno believes his early "draft" to be guilty of an insufficiently dialectical Marxism, one

<sup>90</sup> Günter Mayer, "Eisler and Adorno," in *Hanns Eisler: A Miscellany*, ed. David Blake (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 136.

<sup>91</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 23.

<sup>92</sup> "Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music," 7–8; Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 162–3 "Baby with the bathwater," in Adorno, *Minima Moralia*; "Cultural Criticism and Society," in Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981b; *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000a.)

<sup>93</sup> Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz*, 113.

that fails to do justice to the moment of critical self-reflexivity that, as the "Outline" of "On the Social Situation" emphasizes, is constitutive of successful art despite its inexorably ideological character as semblance.

This reading would be satisfying if Adorno did not appear to already acknowledge this issue in "On the Social Situation of Music," writing in the opening pages that the relation between music and society is "problematic in all its aspects":

If the immanent development of music were established as an absolute—as the mere reflection of the social process—the only result would be a sanction of the fetish character of music which is the major difficulty and most basic problem to be represented by music today. On the other hand, it is clear that music is not to be measured in terms of the existing society of which it is the product and which, at the same time, keeps music in a state of isolation. It is the prerequisite of every historical-materialistic method which hopes to be more than a mere exercise in "intellectual history" that under no conditions is music to be understood as a "spiritual" phenomenon, abstract and far-removed from actual social conditions, which can anticipate through its imagery any desire for social change independently from the empirical realization thereof. It thus becomes obvious that the relation of present-day music and society is problematic in all its aspects. (393)

In any case, as will soon be made very clear, it would be a mistake to infer from the initial moment of my interpretation that Adorno simply equates truth with nonidentity; such an inference would misrepresent how negative dialectics critiques Hegel's speculative philosophy. As Adorno writes at the conclusion of *Against Epistemology*, "Idealism is not simply untruth. It is truth in its untruth."<sup>94</sup>

The word "precedence" in Adorno's self-critique jumps out as affording an opportunity for additional clarification. Adorno believes the crime of the identification musical and material production has something to do with the "precedence" of the latter. But from *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* to his final works, Adorno insists that a sociology of music that delivers on its promises to provide "an insight into [the] essential relation [of musical phenomena] to real society" must prioritize the production of art, meaning the issue of "precedence" referenced in the footnote is not one concerning the precedence of musical production over distribution and consumption, that is, impact or reception.<sup>95</sup> In justifying the priority of production over the other domains of musical activity, Adorno writes the following in the concluding "Mediation"

<sup>94</sup> Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 234.

<sup>95</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 194.

chapter of *Introduction of the Sociology of Music*: “Interlocking in this precedence are the crucial moments for the social dialectic as a whole: human labor, the means by which life is maintained all the way into the utmost sublimations, and the fact that some men dispose of other men’s labor, as the schema of domination.”<sup>96</sup>

Turning to the footnote’s broader contexts, Adorno also seems to be claiming that he failed in his early essay to clarify the development of the musical forces of production are mediated by the relations of production. This claim points to a radical political program opposed to the fetishization of production characteristic of Stalinism. The idea behind such opposition appears to be that a truly emancipated society would not be one liberated from the relations of production in order to freely develop the forces of production but one liberated from the compulsion to develop the forces of production, since the ground of that compulsion is the relations of the production, that is, surplus-value producing class domination. As Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, in one of his more fleshed-out, positive speculations about communism, “Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused.”<sup>97</sup> In the *History and Freedom* lectures, Adorno goes so far as to say that the concrete possibility of fulfillment for all humans has never been a function of the forces of production, meaning that the opportunity of “making a leap forward,” of “doing things differently,” of “a sensible organization of mankind” was probably also available when “social conditions were incomparably more modest,” that such an opportunity in fact “always existed, even in periods when productivity was far less developed.”<sup>98</sup>

A final element of the self-critique, related to the problem of the identification of musical production with the social production of goods in general, is the paradox of the social mediation of spontaneity. The category of spontaneity plays a prominent role in Adorno’s late work with respect to the relationship between theory and praxis (including the critique of student “actionism” for which Marcuse virtuosically excoriated Adorno). According to Adorno, praxis most certainly requires theory, lest the former render itself blind and oppressive; but correct theory alone is not adequate to correct praxis—as suggested above, Adorno views the immediate translation of theory into praxis as emblematic of capitalism’s demand for functional positivities.<sup>99</sup> Adorno writes that

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>97</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 156.

<sup>98</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 67–8.

<sup>99</sup> See “Critique,” in Adorno, *Critical Models*.

praxis requires an additional factor beyond the activity of the intellect, an "irrational," "somatic" factor "alien" to theory: spontaneity.

To illustrate what he means by spontaneity—specifically, how it entails "refusing to be a part of the prevailing evil, a refusal that always implies resisting something stronger and hence always contains an element of despair"—Adorno repeatedly recalls the bomb plot of July 20, 1944 against Hitler. After returning from exile, Adorno met with some of the survivors of the plot, including Fabian von Schlabrendorff, who was tortured and sent to several concentration camps for his role in the conspiracy. In his 1963 *Problems of Moral Philosophy* lectures and the 1964–5 *History and Freedom* lectures, Adorno remarks that upon asking Schlabrendorff how it was possible for him to take action given that it was "a seemingly absurd enterprise" (given that the chances of success were slim and that he likely faced a fate worse than death), the latter replied (in Adorno's paraphrase) that "there are situations that are so intolerable that one just cannot continue to put up with them, no matter what may happen and no matter what may happen to oneself in the course of the attempt to change them."<sup>100</sup> A 1948 letter to Marcuse may offer several additional illustrations of spontaneity to put in dialogue with the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot:

Of course [the doctrine of the victim's freedom in the hands of the executioner] is the old untruth—but I wonder whether, precisely in the face of absolute horror, a trace of truth is not revealed in it? Doesn't the practice of the qualitative leap always have an aspect of hopelessness when it is undertaken? Doesn't it really depend on the woman who, as Kogon reports, snatched the revolver from the Nazi in front of the Auschwitz furnace, shot him down and was shot herself? I have a vague feeling that when the powerless minority seized power in 1917, without a 'mass base,' without the backing of the world spirit, it looked just as absurd, and that the world spirit was precisely therein.<sup>101</sup>

According to Adorno, spontaneity is an irrational impulse of resistance in the face of intolerable conditions. But although it exceeds the purview of rationality, it presupposes theory: "[Schlabrendorff] knew perfectly well how evil, how horrifying this Third Reich was, and it was because of his critical and theoretical insight into the lies and the crimes that he had to deal with that he was brought to the point of action."<sup>102</sup> Another

<sup>100</sup> Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 8; *History and Freedom*, 240.

<sup>101</sup> Adorno, Letter to Herbert Marcuse, Los Angeles, June 25, 1948, in *Theodor W. Adorno Max Horkheimer Briefwechsel Bd. III: 1945–1949* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005b), 428–429.

<sup>102</sup> Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 8.

way Adorno puts this is that spontaneity is a dialectic of rationality and mimesis, a movement between the rationalizing ego and archaic, involuntary reactions repressed by the ego as it obtains control over itself and nature.<sup>103</sup> He substantiates this claim in part via Marx, in a passage that culminates with the definition of spontaneity as “the organ or medium of freedom”:

The spontaneous action that Marx ascribes to the proletariat is supposed on the one hand to be an autonomous, free, rational form of action, action on the basis of a known and comprehensible theory. At the same time, however, it contains an irreducible element, the element of immediate action that does not entirely fit into the factor that theoretically determines it; and, above all, it does not fit smoothly into the determining factors of history. On the contrary, even though it is determined by these, it seems to be a way leading out of them—in extreme contrast to all mechanistic interpretations of the course of history.... Thus, to sum up this part of the argument, the concept of spontaneity, which might be described as the organ or medium of freedom, refuses to obey the logic of non-contradiction, and is instead a unity of mutually contradictory elements.<sup>104</sup>

Interestingly, Adorno, in his later attempts to refine his dialectic of the musical material, refers to the successful artwork as a dialectic of rationality and mimesis. In this dialectic, “mimesis,” Adorno emphasizes, does not refer to imitation or mimicry in any straightforward sense—it is not imitation of an object but an imitative impulse or attitude that seeks to reestablish “a relationship of similarity and thus kinship” between subject and object. This mimetic relationship stands opposed to “the antithetical separation of the two elements” that can be seen in the progressive rationalization of enlightenment, freedom won by the cleavage of the human from the threat of nature and the latter’s reduction to an object of action, the capitalist exchange principle, and so on.<sup>105</sup> In short, music gives voice to suffering, to that which resists rationalization, to “an aspect that is left over from an otherwise tamed nature,”<sup>106</sup> precisely through unwavering rational mastery:

Art is the dialectic between the form-creating principle of rationality and the mimetic impulse. Art assists the latter to fulfill itself by means of techniques and rational procedures. It represents suppressed nature solely by virtue of everything it has developed in the course of the domination of nature. If, instead of carrying through the logic of dialectic, art opts programmatically for one side or the other, it becomes null and void.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 213.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>105</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 42.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>107</sup> Adorno, “Form in New Music,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Music Analysis*

There can be no doubt that the history of music exhibits a progressive process of rationalization. Its different stages are the Guidonian reforms, the introduction of mensural notation, the invention of continuo and of equal temperament, and finally the trend to integral musical construction, which has advanced irresistibly since the time of Bach and has now reached an extreme. But rationalization—which is inseparable from the historical process of the bourgeoisification of music—represents only one of the social features of music, just as rationality itself, Enlightenment, is no more than one aspect of the history of a society that is still developing in an irrational and 'natural' manner even today. Within the global development in which music shared in the progressive emergence of rationality, music at the same time always remained the voice of all who fell by the wayside or were sacrificed on the altar of the rational. This defines the central social contradiction of music, and by the same token it also formulates the tension that has driven musical productivity hitherto. By virtue of its basic material, music is the art in which the prerational, mimetic impulses ineluctably find their voice, as they enter into a pact with the processes leading to the progressive domination of matter and nature. This is the material to which music owes its ability to transcend the business of mere self-preservation, an ability that led Schopenhauer to define it as the immediate objectification of the will, and to place it at the apex of the hierarchy of the arts. If anywhere, it is in music that art rises above the mere repetition of what just happens anyway....[The irrationality administered by the culture industry] constitutes a parody of the protest against the dominance of the concept of classification, a protest of which music is uniquely capable when, as with all the great composers since Monteverdi, it subjects itself to the discipline of the rational. Only by virtue of such rationality can it transcend rationality.<sup>108</sup>

With respect to the question of quality or dignity, and bespeaking *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno describes the artwork's moment of rationality in terms of integration and its mimetic moment in terms of resistance to that integration, such that "in artworks, the criterion of success is twofold: whether they succeed in integrating layers of material and details into their immanent law form [what Adorno usually sums up as semblance] and in this integration at the same time maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration. Integration as such does not assure quality."<sup>109</sup> For Adorno, therefore, the quality, success, or dignity of an artwork does not lie in the effect of the work upon the listener but rather in the development of the dialectic of rationality and mimesis, of integration and

27/ii–iii (2008): 209.

<sup>108</sup> Adorno, "Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music," 7.

<sup>109</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 7. This resonates closely with *Negative Dialectics*, 5: "What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it."

resistance, of semblance and truth-content, at the level of the musical material.

Despite young Adorno's criticisms of Hanns Eisler, quality is not simply a matter of progressive rationalization or integration. Indeed, Adorno never gives Schoenberg's composition a prominent place in his aesthetics simply because the musical means are more advanced than those of Schoenberg's contemporaries. The fact that one might surmise this from "On the Social Situation of Music" is perhaps another source of Adorno's reticence to reissue the early essay. In his later works especially, Adorno speaks of the dubiousness of technical progress and emphasizes a point "made with great force by Hegel in his aesthetics," that there is no direct relationship between the progressive mastery of the material of art and the quality of particular works, meaning that one cannot simply say one composition is better than another by virtue of the degree of formal mastery.<sup>110</sup> As Adorno writes: "Only blindness could deny the aesthetic means gained in painting from Giotto and Cimabue to Piero della Francesca; however, to conclude that Piero's paintings are therefore better than the frescos of Assisi would be schoolmarmish. Whereas with regard to a particular work the question of quality can be posed and decided, and whereas relations are thereby indeed implicit in the judgment of various works, such judgments become art-alien pedantry as soon as comparison is made under the heading of 'better than.'"<sup>111</sup> According to Adorno, one paradox of the philosophy of art history is that works where the control of the artistic material has not yet advanced can have a higher truth-content and thus a higher quality than more advanced ones but that once advances have been made, a rubicon is crossed, meaning any attempt to forego these advanced techniques in the pursuit of higher quality cannot succeed—for example, the discovery of perspective does not make the paintings of the Renaissance intrinsically superior to the works that preceded them, but if the gold background had been defended against the introduction of perspective, that would have been not only reactionary but objectively untrue, since "it would have been contrary to what its own logic called for."<sup>112</sup>

Rather than a matter strictly of rationalization, quality, Adorno claims over and over again, is "essentially related with the structure's own social truth-content."<sup>113</sup> In fact, truth-content is the principal criterion when it comes to judging artworks:

---

<sup>110</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 164–67.

<sup>111</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 211.

<sup>112</sup> Adorno, *The New Music Kranichstein Lectures*, 240.

<sup>113</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 197 and 215.

Progress is not only that of the domination of material and spiritualization but also the progress of spirit in Hegel's sense of the consciousness of freedom. Whether the domination of the material in Beethoven goes beyond that in Bach can be disputed endlessly; with regard to various dimensions, each had superior mastery of the material. Although the question of whom to rank higher is idle, the same cannot be said of the insight that the voice of the maturity of the subject, the emancipation from and reconciliation with myth—that is, the truth-content—reached a higher development in Beethoven than in Bach. This criterion surpasses all others.<sup>114</sup>

Before addressing the meat of this quotation, let me first note that Adorno on several occasions speaks of truth-content with respect to Beethoven's adagios in the final "Paralipomena" section of *Aesthetic Theory*, providing some of the unfinished work's very few examples. With respect to the ascending introduction to the second theme of the *Tempest* sonata's slow movement, for instance, he writes of "what is overwhelming in Beethoven's music and that could be called the spirit of his music: hope, with an authenticity that—as something that appears aesthetically—it bears even beyond aesthetic semblance." His argument appears to be that the "transcendent" character of the second theme is mediated by the configuration of the thematic elements into an aesthetic form—since the atmospheric first thematic complex that precedes the second theme "awaits an event that only becomes an event against the foil of this mood" and thus is essential to the latter's double character as "reconciliation" and "promise"—but such transcendence is not immanent to the configuration or its elements. Hence his culminating claim: "In the authentic artwork, what is dominated—which finds expression by way of the dominating principle—is the counterpoint to the domination of what is natural or material. This dialectical relationship results in the truth-content of artworks."<sup>115</sup>

A related example of truth-content that Adorno mentions in the *Aesthetic Theory* "Paralipomena" section is the D-flat major passage from the adagio of the op. 59, no. 1 quartet. In his sketches for an unfinished book on Beethoven, he speaks of that passage much like the second theme of the *Tempest*. The example is meant to establish how Beethoven's music is like Hegel's philosophy but truer, how "it is informed by the conviction that the self-reproduction of society as a self-identical entity is not enough, indeed that is it false." As Adorno continues, "Logical identity as immanent to form...is both constituted and criticized by Beethoven. Its seal of truth in Beethoven's music lies in its suspen-

<sup>114</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 212.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 284–5.

sion: through transcending it, form takes on its true meaning. This formal transcendence...is a representation...of hope." How does the D-flat major passage illustrate all this? According to Adorno, "This passage appears superfluous since it comes after a quasi-retransition, after which the recapitulation is expected to follow immediately. But when the recapitulation fails to appear it is made clear that formal identity is insufficient, manifesting itself as true only at the moment when it, as the real, is opposed by the possible which lies outside identity. The Db major theme is new: it is not reducible to the economy of motivic unity."<sup>116</sup>

As these examples clarify, the truth-content that emerges from the dialectic of rationality and mimesis—truth-content qua "the emancipation from and reconciliation with myth"—points to negative dialectics qua a critique of Hegel's philosophy of identity (the anamnesis of the violence in the thought that carries out the identification<sup>117</sup>) and Adorno and Horkheimer's "positive" concept of enlightenment (a moment of critical self-reflexivity that gives voice to what progressive rationalization represses as it attempts to free itself from what it fears<sup>118</sup>). It also betokens the exchange principle described in the previous section. As Adorno writes in his Beethoven book sketches, wholeness and so semblance mean fungibility in the sense that "no individual thing exists 'in itself,' and everything is only in relation to the whole"; and "the truth or untruth of [bourgeois music] can be determined from the question of fungibility"—"how can a whole exist without doing violence to the individual part?"—a question with "both a progressive *and* a regressive tendency" and whose difficulty grows with the development of the productive forces of music.<sup>119</sup> In sum, then, music's quality and thus its truth-content depend, first, on liberation from myth or nature

<sup>116</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 277; Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 14.

The theme of suffering that Adorno elsewhere emphasizes in his elaborations of the dialectic of semblance and truth-content is not so conspicuous in these Beethoven examples. For instance, with respect to the works of Berg and Mahler, which will be discussed in forthcoming portions of this project, Adorno refers to "the marks of stress and agony" wrought by the achievement of "complete success" and of "the shabby residue left by triumph [that] accuses the triumphant." Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, trans. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40; Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>117</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 30.

<sup>118</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 29–34.

<sup>119</sup> Adorno, *Beethoven*, 34–5.

through the technical progress *cum* exchange principle that endows music with its semblance character (the appearance that it constitutes an integrated, *sui generis* reality) and, second, on a mimetic reconciliation with that which liberation represses and mutilates, a reconciliation that convicts the first moment on which it depends of its dubiousness. As the Beethoven examples make exceedingly clear, there are thus two moments for Adorno when it comes to social truth: the moment of identity (that is, the moment of the encounter with the totality governed by the exchange relationship) is a prerequisite of the moment of nonidentity (that is, the moment of the recollection of the totality's falsity). To miss the centrality of the former is to miss what is distinctively Marxist about Adorno's dialectics, that it is an attempt to think the capitalist totality without throwing out "the baby with the bath-water," without foreclosing the possibility of communism.

Now it is perhaps clear what Adorno believes he failed to adequately articulate in his initial exposition of the dialectic of the musical material: that is, an account of the spontaneous truth-content that exceeds the illusion of technical integration even as it is mediated by it. To recap, through the composer's stringent adherence to the demands of the socially "preformed" musical material (that is, through the attempt to master this material totally), the consequent composition gives voice to that which resists and destabilizes this process of rationalization and integration, revealing the wholeness of the work *qua* semblance to be false. In other words, such music makes manifest not only the guilt of art's semblance character but also an aspect of semblance that is more than semblance—the truth of the suffering of all that falls victim to the social process of rationalization of which art's autonomy is a part. It thus becomes "the organ or medium of freedom" in ways that point to communist politics. First off, it anticipates utopia in the specific sense of a rationally planned communist society that makes possible universal freedom insofar as it eliminates the fateful, irrational compulsion of privation on which accumulation is based without repressing the non-identical. Second, it offers intimations of the bridging of the gap between theory and praxis, embodying "the qualitative leap," the situation where what is determined by history nonetheless escapes determination, a non-repressive practice that rejects the polarized alternatives of organization and freedom, a glimpse of life without fear that transcends the business of mere self-preservation, and so on. In sum, then, precisely in the failure of the artwork to fulfill its promise of happiness—"in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity," for unity between

"form and content, inside and outside, individual and society"<sup>120</sup>—the artwork does justice to its promise in an eminently concrete fashion, not simply giving expression to the truth of the social inexorability of suffering with which any politics adequate to "right life" must begin but also modeling a truly free society, a rationally organized collectivity that is not antithetical to heterogeneity.

Only in light of all this does Adorno's commitment to theory as a communist politics, articulated already in "On the Social Situation," make any sense. As Adorno wrote in a 1934 letter to Hans Redlich:

But since I am aware of no revolution that has any form other than logical consistency, that is to say, none that has ever emancipated itself from its basis in history, and since absolutely every other procedure, every other ostensibly more radical venture that starts from scratch, takes the form of a bad utopia and for the most part simply represents a backsliding into conditions of production whose substance cannot be recreated out of pure immediacy, I am compelled to stick with logical consistency until an inconsistency makes its appearance whose own truth-content proves to be genuine.<sup>121</sup>

And only with all this in mind can one sense a strange, feeble light in the tragic, sable circumstances of Adorno's untimely death, the cause of which is often portrayed not simply as a heart attack but as heartbreak from the conflict with his students, a political failure that has cast a shadow over his life's work. For this irony (wherein Adorno came to be seen as the police-state authoritarian against which he always inveighed) entails another. Through his efforts to discredit his students, Adorno, much like the dialectical composer at the heart of his critical theory of music, develops an account of spontaneity congenial to their aims. "Reason is a poor ally of reaction," Horkheimer writes in 1939 with respect to Hegel.<sup>122</sup> Hence, in Adorno's attempt to construct a consistent account of theory's monopoly on the preservation of praxis in the non-revolutionary moment of the mid-twentieth century, he (despite himself) again and again gives voice to an incongruous philosophy of spontaneity adequate to his students' cause, inspiring them to undertake their own absurd attempt before the furnace, to fearlessly reach, however ineffectually, for life without fear.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 103.

<sup>121</sup> Claussen, 157.

<sup>122</sup> Max Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1972), 271.

<sup>123</sup> In "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 274–5, Adorno tries to deny the link between his students and the July 20<sup>th</sup> conspirators. He reiterates the point in a May 5, 1969 letter to Marcuse on the student opposition. In short, he argues not simply that the

## Bibliography

- ADORNO, THEODOR W. *Impromptus. Zweite Folge neu gedruckter musikalischer Aufsätze*. 2nd edition, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Dissonanzen: Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Briefwechsel*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York: Seabury Press, 1976a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. Translated by Glyn Adey and Frisby. New York: Harper Row, 1976b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In Search of Wagner*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. London: NLB, 1981a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Notes to Literature*. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992b.

---

situation of the late 60s (especially the war against the Vietcong) is not as terrible as the murder of the European Jewry, but that those who lived through the latter (namely, he and Marcuse) withstood that more terrible situation without proceeding to blocked praxis, evidently because of "bourgeois coldness," without which "one could not live" in capitalist society. Hence his "blunt" response to Marcuse: "I think you are deluding yourself in being unable to go on without participating in the student stunts." Or as he puts it in "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," "In the security of America an emigrant could endure the news of Auschwitz; it would be difficult to believe that Vietnam is robbing anyone of sleep." Whether or not the denial holds water—and in the *Negative Dialectics* lectures of 1965, Adorno calls Vietnam a repetition of Auschwitz "in another guise"—his rebuttal seems to acknowledge a rhyme between the various examples of spontaneity to which he refers in his lectures and his students' actions. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 19. It is also worth noting Angela Davis's recollection of Adorno's teaching: "In Frankfurt, we had many conversations about the value of Adorno's work that also helped us to develop an immanent critique of his stand with respect to activism." Angela Davis, "Bridging Theory and Practice: An Interview with Angela Davis," interview by Erin Hagood and Duyminh Tran, *Platypus Review*, Dec 7, 2001, <https://platypus1917.org/2021/07/03/bridging-theory-and-practice-an-interview-with-angela-davis/>.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Alban Berg, Master of the Smallest Link*. Translated by Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Henry W. Pickford Goehr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sound Figures*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Meridian, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Introduction to Sociology*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Essays on Music*. Translated by Susan H. Gillespie. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Max Horkheimer. Briefwechsel 1927 - 1969: Band III: 1945 - 1949*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag AG, 2005b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. London: Verso, 2005c.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophy of New Music*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. 1st edition, Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2006b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Form in the New Music". *Music analysis* 27 (2008a): 201–216. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2249.2009.00280.x.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity, 2008b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Radical Thinkers, London and New York: Verso, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*. Translated by Willis Domingo. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Aesthetics*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity, 2017.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Theodor W. Adorno on 'Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory'". *Historical materialism : research in critical Marxist theory* 26 (2018)(1): 154–164. doi:10.1163/1569206x-00001619.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The New Music: Kranichstein Lectures*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Medford: Polity, 2021.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Without Model: Parva Aesthetica*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. London: Seagull Books, 2023.
- ADORNO, THEODOR W., WALTER BENJAMIN, ERNST BLOCH, BERTOLT BRECHT, AND GYÖRGY LUKÁCS. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translated by Ronald Taylor. London: Verso, 1980.
- ADORNO, THEODOR W. AND MAX HORKHEIMER. *Towards a New Manifesto*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. London and New York: Verso, 2019.
- ADORNO, THEODOR W. AND HERBERT MARCUSE. "Introduction to Adorno/- Marcuse Correspondence". *New Left Review* (1999) (I/233): 118–123.
- BAUM, FELIX AND JACOB BLUMENFELD. *The Frankfurt School and Council Communism, 1160–1178*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018. doi: 10.4135/9781526436122.n70.
- BLAKE, DAVID, ed. *Hanns Eisler: A Miscellany*. Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995.
- BRAUNSTEIN, DIRK. *Adorno's Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Adam Balner. Chicago: Brill, 2022.

- BUCK-MORSS, SUSAN. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: Free Press, 1977.
- CLAUSSEN, DETLEV. *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.
- DAVIS, ANGELA. "The Platypus Affiliated Society – Bridging Theory and Practice: An Interview with Angela Davis", 2020.
- EISLER, HANNS. *Composing for the Films*. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971.
- . *A Rebel in Music: Selected Writings*. Translated by Marjorie Meyer. New York: International Publishers, 1978.
- GORDON, PETER ELI. *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023.
- HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- HORKHEIMER, MAX. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.
- HORKHEIMER, MAX AND THEODOR W. ADORNO. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- JAMESON, FREDRIC. *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*. London: Verso, 2007.
- O'KANE, CHRIS. "Introduction to 'Theodor W. Adorno on Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory. From a Seminar Transcript in the Summer Semester of 1962'". *Historical materialism: research in critical Marxist theory* 26 (2018)(1): 137–153. doi:10.1163/1569206X-00001618.
- PADDISON, MAX. *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511549441.
- ROSE, GILLIAN. *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- SLONIMSKY, NICOLAS. *Music Since 1900*. New York: Schirmer Reference, 1994.

SOHN-RETHEL, ALFRED. *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*. Translated by Martin Sohn-Rethel. Chicago: Haymarket, 2020.

WIGGERSHAUS, ROLF. *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*. Translated by Michael Robertson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.



## **Appendices**



## Appendix 1 - Methodology

*Mac Parker*

*Author’s Note: This Appendix was originally intended as a methodological introduction included in the body of the essay. I have reproduced it here in order to allow the reader to get a more concrete sense of my underlying methodology. In the interest of time, its overall form has not been updated to reflect its position as a relatively independent piece, for which I hope you will excuse me.*

In order to give not just a historical, but a historical materialist grounding to the emergence and early development of the concept of essence, the principles Marcuse sets forward in the last section of his essay on the Materialist concept of essence provide a fairly useful starting point, although they will have to be revised somewhat and concretized to suit our purposes here.<sup>1</sup> The first principle is that we must understand isolated instances as moments of a total social process and evaluate their content in relation to this process. I would like to emphasize the process aspect of this principle here even more strongly than Marcuse does in his essay. For our purposes, this means that we cannot just take a synchronic snapshot of the social formations in which PSM developed as they were structured at the time and use it as an explanatory framework for the development of his concept of essence. Rather, to truly understand the determinations of the emergent concept of essence in their relation to the total social process of which they form a set of moments, we must understand both the synchronic totality and its individual elements as equally moments in a process, or even in a set of uneven and combined processes. This means understanding individual elements and general conditions in relation not only to the totality of other elements present at a given time but also to their antecedents and the development from the latter to the former in combination with or divergence from other developments that make up the totality. More specifically, in our case, it means understanding these Archaic social formations and their elements,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” 50–64.

of which PSM makes up a set, in the context of historical processes extending back through the Archaic period and Early Iron Age, all the way back to at least what Archeologist Alex Knodell calls the “Post-Palatial Bronze Age.”<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, this cut-off point is necessarily arbitrary to some extent and, furthermore, this perspective could easily lead us into the bad infinity of an increasingly extensive search for grounds for historical explanation. To avoid this, it is necessary to focus our investigation on the factors and processes relevant to the questions we are trying to answer, and to bring in another principle of Marcuse’s materialist doctrine of essence, i.e. that the totality of these processes “is structured in a second way; even though they interact, the various levels of social reality nevertheless are grounded in one fundamental level.”<sup>3</sup> Marcuse further argues that “in the current historical period, the economy as the fundamental level has become ‘essential’ in such a way that all other levels have become its ‘manifestations.’”<sup>4</sup> This may be true in a sense if we consider ‘the economy’ in the reified manner in which it presents itself as a separate and autonomous region of social life under capitalist conditions of production, but if we follow Marx in taking a more expansive view of the economic base of society as “the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of production of his life” which itself involves “the process of the production of the social relations of his life” and “the mental conceptions that flow from those relations”, or as the “social process of production in general,” which involves producing, and reproducing, “production relations themselves, and thereby also the bearers of this process, their material conditions of existence and their mutual relations,” then it is clear that this layer of the direct interchange between human beings and nature, and the relations entered into in order to mediate this interchange and reproduce human societies as collections of living beings should be considered as foundational regardless of the historical period under consideration.<sup>5</sup>

It should be clear from the preceding description that this ‘economic’ foundation is already a complex object of investigation—one which has troubled Marxists for generations, producing a plethora of divergent lines of interpretation that are traditionally grouped under the heading of the ‘problem of base and superstructure’. Questions abound as to

---

<sup>2</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” 51.

<sup>4</sup> Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” 51.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 493, n. 4 and Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. III, trans. David Fernbach (Penguin, 1991), 957.

the precise meaning of almost every term Marx uses in his descriptions of this economic ‘base’ and to the relations between them. What qualifies as ‘direct’ production? What falls under the heading of “man’s life”? Mere subsistence? More than that? How do we distinguish the direct process of production from the production of the social relations that accompany this direct production? Can we? The answer to this last question must be that we can do so only analytically, for—as Marx emphasizes in the section of the *Grundrisse* on “forms which precede capitalist production”—the community, in this case the “natural” or “clan” community, is, from the beginning, “the first presupposition—the communality of blood, language, customs—for the *appropriation of the objective conditions* of their life, and of their life’s reproducing and objectifying activity.”<sup>6</sup> Here we see the complexity of the dialectic of “direct production” and “production of the relations of production”, in which the direct appropriation of the objective conditions of life actually presupposes elements having to do with the relations of production, or that might even be considered superstructural—language, custom, kinship structures—although clearly these elements could not themselves exist without the appropriation that constitutes the base. These elements are inseparably bound in a relationship of evolving reciprocal determination that rests ultimately on nature as both origin and substratum of human life, which is itself a part of nature that can only be separated off from the rest from a one-sided perspective. Sorting out these determinations only becomes more difficult as this evolving relationship develops historically and as we move from the abstraction of the simple human community to the concrete multiplicity of divergent and interacting communities and social formations that form the objects of historical research.

With all this in mind, I will take the economic foundation, which the non-economic instances must be understood in relation to, broadly and with an eye to its complexity and the reciprocal determination of its elements. This means not making an absolute distinction between direct production of the objective conditions of life and the production of social relations, but rather seeing them together in the ways in which they pass over into each other and from there into the superstructural elements conditioned by them, and which ultimately turn back to condition them in turn. At the same time, acknowledging this reciprocal determination does not mean refusing to establish an order of explanatory priority

---

<sup>6</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 472. It doesn’t matter so much whether Marx is correct about the details of the first forms of human community and social production. The point stands that human production has been from the first *social* production and therefore presupposes the concrete human community.

moving from the broadly economic base to the superstructure.

For our purposes, the most important developments within the economic base will be changes in the mode of exploitation (surplus appropriation), and commercialization. The mode of exploitation is the central determination of the overall class structure of a given social formation.<sup>7</sup> Following G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, I take the class structure of a social formation to grow out of, and be classifiable according to, the primary form in which the surplus labor of direct producers is appropriated by the owners of the means of production, whether or not this is the most widespread form in which the labor of a society is carried out.<sup>8</sup> Before moving on to commercialization, I think it'll be useful to take a moment to expand upon the concepts of 'surplus labor', 'appropriation', and 'owners of the means of production' in terms of the concept of labor as it is worked out by Marx across a number of his works. In the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx says that "all production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society."<sup>9</sup> We should understand this "appropriation" as a *making one's own* of the objective conditions of existence, of nature understood as "the sensuous external world" or "man's inorganic body," which therefore includes also the nature that has already been taken up and transformed as a product of past labor.<sup>10</sup> It is a *making one's own* in the sense that in the process of labor human beings transform the objective conditions of their existence according to their own consciously and conceptually mediated purposes.<sup>11</sup> As seen above, this appropriation of nature presupposes the specific social forms within and through which it is realized, and labor should be understood as appropriating and transforming the social forms through which it is made possible as well. This appropriation is not just a taking up of the natural and social conditions of existence, but a self-directed process of reciprocal determination in which the purposeful activity of human beings transforms those conditions to suit the workers own needs, and transform their own nature and needs in the process.<sup>12</sup> It is in transforming the objects

<sup>7</sup> I'm here using social formation in the Althusserian sense of the concrete instantiation of a mode of production as laid out in Marta Harnecker, "Mode of Production, Social Formation and Political Conjuncture" *Theoretical Review*, no. 17 (1980): 23–30, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/theoretical-review/tr-17-3.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*.

<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 72–5.

<sup>11</sup> For the ongoing importance of purpose to Marx's conception of human labor, see Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 248.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 75–6.

of labor that human beings turn the given external world into a world of their own, that they make the objects of nature into their own means of subsistence and organs of their own activity. It is this appropriation of nature, this objectification of their own activity, that constitutes the basis of the juridical notion of property, whether in the form of directly communal labor that gives rise to the appropriation of the communal conditions of existence in the form of communal ownership or private labor that gives rise to the appropriation of individual (or household) conditions of existence as private property.<sup>13</sup> Surplus labor is labor that is not directed towards fulfilling the direct needs of the individual whose activity it is (whether as an individual or as a member of the community); labor the purpose of which is externally determined and the product of which is externally appropriated. It is labor the product of which is appropriated by another and—as Marx notes in the *1844 Manuscripts*—this always takes the form of another human being.<sup>14</sup> This other person thereby owns the means of production, and the products of the labor appropriated through them, which labor can itself be seen as belonging to said owner.

In the section of the *Grundrisse* on pre-capitalist forms mentioned above, Marx describes how this relation between surplus labor and ownership works out in early forms of either tribal organization or what he calls “oriental despotism,” in which the land and community as original presuppositions of the communal labor process come to be represented by the figure(s) embodying the unity of the community (be it the despot, chief, or groups of patriarchs) who, as embodiments of that unity, are considered the true, or higher, owners of the land and thereby appropriate the surplus labor of the community and subordinate the functions that ensure the reproduction of the communal conditions of appropriation to themselves on the basis of their control over that surplus appropriation.<sup>15</sup> This subordination of the functions that guarantee the overall reproduction of the community to the members of a special class itself serves to perpetuate their place at the top of the relations of exploitation insofar as the community as a whole becomes dependent on them for its continued existence. As we shall see, there are still elements of this at play in the pre-Classical Greek social formations, although the privatization of labor and so property had developed—and increasingly coalesced over the course of the Late Bronze and Early

<sup>13</sup> See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 87–8 and 469 for this relation between appropriation and ownership.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 474–5.

Iron Ages—into a form in which the community was constituted as a collection of individual households, the unity of which primarily lay in the bearers of its martial and religious functions, the warrior-aristocracy, who, by the beginning of the Archaic period, had begun to appropriate their surplus more through slave labor than through tribute or the direct appropriation of the surplus of other communities in the form of booty.

Commercialization is the term I will use to designate the process through which the sphere of commodity production, exchange and consumption expanded over the course of the period under study. In the beginning, this process was primarily a result of external trade between communities, and in particular of long distance trade with other societies along the Mediterranean, in which the Greeks were not at first the main drivers of this trade but functioned as trading partners for more commercial societies like that of the Phoenicians.<sup>16</sup> Over time, the demand for exchange goods created by foreign trade itself increases the internal division of labor in a community and the development of internal exchange relations, detaching, or making use of the detachment of, groups of workers from their direct relation to the land and assigning them to increasingly specialized functions that are directed towards the production of exchange values rather than use values for their own subsistence. This in turn increases the demand for agricultural exchange goods to serve as means of subsistence for these commodity producers. This expansion of commodity production and exchange creates a dynamic of both disintegration of the organic unity of production in traditional communities and households—as spheres of production are broken off and made independent—and reintegration of these separated off spheres—and of whole communities whose different means of production and subsistence are turned into interdependent spheres of a single social division of labor—but now as integrated solely through the exchange relation.<sup>17</sup> The ultimate result of this process in ancient Greece was the *polis* qua city, in which this exchange mediated integration of different communities and spheres of production across a larger territory had its social unity—although this unity was itself dependent on the aristocratic appropriation of surplus labor that provided the bulk of the means of subsistence on which the existence of the *polis* depended.

The other major result of this process of increasing commoditization was the crystallization of money as the separated-off universal equivalent in which all other commodities express their values. Here is how Marx

---

<sup>16</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 181–4.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 471–2.

describes the dynamic at play in this development:

The historical broadening and deepening of the phenomenon of exchange develops the opposition between use value and value which is latent in the nature of the commodity. The need to give an external expression to this opposition for the purposes of commercial intercourse produces the drive towards an independent form of value, which finds neither rest nor peace until an independent form has been achieved by the differentiation of commodities into commodities and money. At the same rate, then, as the transformation of the products of labor into commodities is accomplished, one particular commodity is transformed into money.<sup>18</sup>

As Marx indicates here, the process of commodification that was seen to result in the *polis* as the externalized, exchange-mediated social unity of the independent communities and spheres of production is at the same time a process of monetization, which gives objective unity to the commodity relations that form the basis of that social unity. In the Greek context, this finds its developed expression in the invention of coinage, in which the polis qua state guaranteed the value and mandated the universal acceptability of its own form of money within the territory integrated under it. The introduction of coinage further accelerated this dynamic of commoditization-monetization and had profound consequences for the social formations that it spread to, which included the cities in which the pre-Socratic Monism of the first Greek philosophers developed.

## Bibliography

- DE STE. CROIX, G. E. M. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- KNODELL, ALEX R. *Societies in Transition in Early Greece: An Archaeological History*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021.
- MARCUSE, HERBERT. "The Concept of Essence". In *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, 31–64. London: Mayfly Books, 2009.
- MARTA HARNECKER. "Mode of Production, Social Formation and Political Conjuncture". *Theoretical Review* (1980)(17): 23–30. URL <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/theoretical-review/tr-17-3.pdf>.

---

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 181.

- MARX, KARL. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844". In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 2ns edition. New York: Norton, 1978.
- . *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by David Fernbach, volume vol. III. Penguin classics edition, London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- . *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. Penguin classics, London, 1993.

## Appendix 2 - Slavery, Commercialization and the Changing Mode of Production in Pre-Archaic Greece

Mac Parker

It is clear that from a very early point, slavery and the development of commerce were bound up with each other. In fact, in his *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, Émile Benveniste shows how the notions of purchase and sale, value and price, which have a common origin that predates the split between Greek and Indo-Iranian, originally referred exclusively to human beings, in particular to the purchase and sale of war captives and the right of captors to dispose of them how they please.<sup>1</sup> He also indicates the way in which the concept of a person's 'worth' or 'merit' has the same origins, deriving from the price paid to ransom a captive.<sup>2</sup> From this, we can see that both slavery and commercial relations predate the development of a specifically Greek culture and that in this Indo-European culture complex both arise out of different aspects of the inter-communal relations surrounding war and raiding. In the case of slavery this is further confirmed by the origins of the terms that characterize the relationship between the slave and the free across the Indo-European languages.<sup>3</sup> The terms for the former tended to derive from words that refer to the origins of the people they apply to outside the community. This seems likely with the Greek *doulos*, which is thought to be derived from a proper name originating in Asia Minor and is attested as far back as Mycenaean Greek, despite its absence in Homer, who tends to use words connected with the household to denote

---

<sup>1</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Hau Books, 2016), 97–9.

<sup>2</sup> Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 97–9.

<sup>3</sup> Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 261. The universality of this distinction between the slave and the free across the Indo-European languages can be taken as further evidence for the presence of the institution of slavery in the Indo-European culture before the splitting off of the people who would form the different linguistic communities and of its institutional endurance across all of them.

slaves, although he does use the feminine form *doulē*, which may be a result of the predominance of female slaves in the world depicted in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.<sup>4</sup> The words for the free man, on the other hand, tend to derive in these languages from either the notion of growth from good stock (the Greek *eleutheros* being among these), taking a metaphor from animal husbandry, or from the notion of a closed group characterized by bonds of friendship, as in the Germanic languages. Both of these converge on membership in a shared community, whether seen as ethnic or united by custom and sentiment.<sup>5</sup> This constitution of the free and the slave as communal boundary markers may indicate that originally the relationship was one of communal subordination, a phenomenon which we still see in the Classical period, as in the case of the Spartan Helots.<sup>6</sup>

Whether referring to relationships between communities or individuals, the basic dichotomy free-slave that persists from Indo-European culture down to the Classical Athens, and beyond, originates in the distinction between those who constitute together a community and those considered outsiders, strangers, or enemies, i.e., to the constitution of the closed community that Marx referred to above as a precondition of the appropriation of the objective conditions of life. While the community may be internally constituted by bonds of kinship and reciprocal obligation, it is constituted externally by war and mutual hostility. The prisoner of war is an outsider. Therefore he is inherently excluded from the community through which an individual is determined not just as free, but as an individual, and one with rights to a share of the communal appropriation of the objective conditions of life.<sup>7</sup> His captor has produced him as captive, as an object for his own consumption, and therefore has the “right” to dispose of him as he pleases, whether this means ransoming him back to his own community or kin in return for a portion of the products of their labor, or keeping him as a slave to serve as an instrument of the appropriation of the conditions of his (the captor’s) existence.

Returning to the fact that buying and selling seem to refer solely to

<sup>4</sup> Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 289–94; Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 49. This predominance is especially true of the *Iliad* and the historical situation(s) it corresponds to will be discussed further below.

<sup>5</sup> Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 261–71.

<sup>6</sup> De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 136.

<sup>7</sup> For the derivation of terms denoting individuality from terms that originally designated communal belonging, see Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 266–71. For the identity of the community and the appropriation of the communal land, see Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 296 and Marx, *Grundrisse*, 471–2.

the buying and selling of human beings in the earliest terminology of Indo-European societies, it is useful to ask why this might have been the case and how this simple commodity relation might have originated. We can see the intercommunal warfare and raiding that this relation arises in as a form of surplus appropriation in which one community appropriates the objective conditions of existence of another community in the form of booty, whether this be livestock, metals, prestige objects or slaves. The captured enemy warrior presents a particular problem here in that their status and capacities as a warrior would presumably make them more resistant to enslavement. This is supported by the Homeric account, in which enemy men are either killed or ransomed while only women are taken as slaves as a result of wars and raiding.<sup>8</sup> In the taking of a captive then, the captor appropriates someone who in his own community would be a subject of the communal labor process and, in the activity of capturing them, produces them as an object of appropriation along with the other spoils of war. The captive is objectified insofar as they are separated from the relations of production that constitute them as such a subject in much the same way as the slave would be when made into an instrument of production for the master, but something about their status or capacities as a warrior prevents them from being utilized in this manner. This status or set of capacities that prevents the captor from making the captive into an object of utility is precisely what constituted them as a subject of labor for their original community, and also represents a definite quantity of communal labor time in rearing, training and socializing them into the relations of production of that community. The captor then has in his possession a strange object—an element of booty, an objectified subject of labor produced as such by the activity of warfare/raiding—that cannot be consumed except by being exchanged, by being returned into the community in which it can be resubjectivated, in return for products, presumably of the kind that would normally be taken as booty. The ransom of the captive represents an extension of the taking of booty in the raid, but mediated through exchange. For the buyers of the captive, he also represents an objectivized subject of labor, but one that cannot be consumed without being exchanged for. Since the captive was not alienated from his community by means of exchange, they pay the full price for him, i.e. primarily the price of their own labor that went into producing him as a subject of labor; but, due to his being objectivized by his capture, his material body represents the value of the goods they exchange for him and so

---

<sup>8</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 49.

this value seems to be attached to him, to individualize him as equal to a certain portion of communal labor as an individual rather than as a product of the communal labor. In this we can perhaps see an early seed of the privatization of the communal, clan and extended family property into individual portions that only together constitute the communal property. We also see in this development, and the related linguistic development mentioned above of the notion of a persons 'worth' or 'value', an early notion of the essence of a specific individual, not yet recognizable as such by those who think it, as it arises out of the social process of production and becomes posited as such through the process of exchange and thereby becomes thinkable, although in a distorted form. This essence actually expresses the individual as a product of social labor, as a objectivised subject of labor representing a portion of the total social labor and therefore equalizable to products representing another portion of that social labor, but the objectification means that he is represented only insofar as he is excluded from participation in that labor as an active subject, and the simple value form represents his material body, his person, as the form of expression of that labor, rather than making visible the social production that underlies it.

The development from these early origins of slavery and commodity exchange to the increasingly monetized and slave dependent *poleis* of the archaic and classical social formations that produce Pre-Socratic Monism is a long one in which the two processes are in continuous reciprocal determination. In the world of Early Iron Age Greece, as depicted in the Homeric epics, neither of these developments has come to its full fruition, although we can see indications of a fundamental change in both spheres that is about to take place and was already in motion by the time that the poems were composed.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, slaves in the Iliad and Odyssey are for the most part women and this seems to be a result of the continued connection of slavery to the practice of raiding and the difficulties associated with appropriating captured male warriors as booty. The place of foreign women as objects of appropriation can be seen here as continuous with the general status of the women who "belong" to the community, who, though recognized in some sense as "free" members of the household and community, are never fully attached to the either the household they were born in nor the

---

<sup>9</sup> For the use of the Homeric poems as evidence of the social and institutional world of Early Iron Age Greece, see Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 43–5, where he specifically identifies the 10th and 9th centuries BCE as the period they refer to. For the development of commodity exchange and its intrusion into the Homeric Poems, see Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 26–33.

one they marry into, with their status and the determination of which household they belong to being transferable and revocable, dependent on their relation to their husband or father, and on the exchange of gifts between these figures.<sup>10</sup> Finley also attributes to this connection between the appropriation of slaves through raiding and the relative absence of male slaves the fact that slave labor seems to be confined to the domestic sphere for the most part.<sup>11</sup>

Before going further into the reciprocal development of slavery and commercialization, let's look briefly at the general organization of pre-Archaic Greek social formations in the earlier pole of this development. The archeological evidence suggests that in the period following the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces, in Central Greece at least, there was greater social mobility and an overall lower degree of inequality that corresponded with more dispersed settlement patterns.<sup>12</sup> There was also a general movement towards the sea and the appearance of ship and siege imagery in elite drinking vessels.<sup>13</sup> Then, in the Prehistoric Iron Age, which roughly corresponds with Finley's dating of the Homeric world, settlement patterns begin to concentrate again, especially around particular sites, with inequality growing at these sites as well.<sup>14</sup> There is also more evidence of interregional integration than in previous periods, with intercommunal sanctuaries becoming increasingly prevalent.<sup>15</sup> Combined with the insecure status of kingship in the Homeric epics, which tends to blend together with that of nobles, both of which are most commonly referred to by the same term, *basileus* (of which there were multiple on Ithaca, despite Odysseus being king) we can infer that this solidification of the nobility corresponded with the consolidation of larger territorial units.<sup>16</sup> Given the prominence of seaborne raiding in the pottery of the post-palatial bronze age, and the general warfare-based definition of the aristocracy in the epics, one major impetus for this consolidation was probably communal defense, which could have resulted in warrior elites appropriating a larger share of the communal property on the basis of the importance of this function (it also seems plausible that the greater economic power and martial power of this elite allowed them to appropriate further portions of the communal land by force

<sup>10</sup> For the precarious and revocable inclusion of Penelope in the household of Odysseus, see Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 87. See also, Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 191–203.

<sup>11</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 49–50.

<sup>12</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 120–50.

<sup>13</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 129–31.

<sup>14</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 153–67.

<sup>15</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 212–15.

<sup>16</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 82.

in many situations).<sup>17</sup> In combination with the spoils of raiding and conquest, this would have established a situation like that we see on Odysseus' Ithaca, in which a warrior elite appropriates both the greatest share of the external surplus extracted through war and raiding, as well as of the communal surplus in the forms of a greater share of the communal land and tribute. This allowed them to support a larger household made up not just of slaves but also of retainers and supplemented with hired labor consisting of unattached laborers presumably driven off their land or forced to leave their household in this process of warfare and consolidation. So the aristocracy supported themselves through the appropriation of the surplus labor of their household, on its expanded share of the communal land, and within this household the distinction between slave and "free" commoner was obscured by their common exploitation. They also extracted surplus from the rest of the community, as the need arose, in the form of tribute, as can be seen from the scene in which King Alcinous of the Phaeacians bade the gathered Phaeacian aristocrats to "each give [Odysseus] a great tripod and a cauldron," for, "we in turn shall gather among the people and be recompensed."<sup>18</sup> This recompense is countenanced in the language of gift exchange, and, at least formally and in its origins, it is a reciprocal exchange, in which the surplus extracted from the commoners is compensated by the protection offered by the aristocrats.

Besides deriving their status and share in the appropriation of the communal surplus from their function within the necessary communal labor of self-defense and warfare, the Homeric aristocrats also derived these in part from their role in the constitutive communal labor of religion. The shift to public religious activity centered on the temple did not truly take off until the 8th century BCE, and the majority of religious activity in the epics consists of sacrifices (and sacrificial feasts) conducted on makeshift altars under the authority of aristocratic figures.<sup>19</sup> The feasts attached to these sacrifices helped develop communal, inter-communal, and intra-communal group cohesion, and so were a

---

<sup>17</sup> We see early examples of this kind of relation in the Proto-Indo-European Yamana culture as its migratory chiefs moved into the Carpathians and Balkans, forming patron-client relationships with the local settled population in which they "guaranteed protection, hospitality, and the recognition of the villagers' rights to agricultural production in exchange for their loyalty, service, and best land." Anthony, *The Horse, The Wheel, and Language: How Bronze Age Riders From the Eurasian Steppe Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 366.

<sup>18</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 115 and Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 39–47.

necessary part of the communal labor that was organized and provisioned by the warrior aristocrats. In fact, religion is just as integral to the constitution of the community as warfare. It expresses and sanctions the interpersonal and intercommunal relations that not only cohere the community internally but also situate it within larger networks of alliance and interconnection which it depends on for survival. It was on the basis of these interpersonal and intercommunal relations that the community was constituted as such, and so that the communal appropriation of the objective conditions of existence was made possible. These relations were institutionalized ritually, from the vow, to the guest—host relation, to the sacrificial feast, and the gods provided the supersensible power that guaranteed their social sanctity. This can be seen in the verb *kraino*, which originally denoted the divine sanction on which rested the authority of the *wanax* or *basileus*—as well as the poet or oracle—and the success of their endeavors, along with the realization of their speech.<sup>20</sup> These figures would have been the primary points of contact between the mortal world and the Gods, as seen throughout the poems, and both their religious functions, such as organizing the sacrifice, and their martial functions, the glory of which rises up to the heavens in the same fashion as the smoke from the sacrificial animal, are a part of securing this link. In the same way, both functions are involved in appropriating their portion of the communal surplus, which can be seen in the formula in which to give tribute is to “honor him like a god with gifts.”<sup>21</sup>

Now that we have seen the broad outlines of this earlier form of social organization, let us return to our historical narrative by examining slavery and the organization of production in the Homeric poems. In his classic work, *The World of Odysseus*, Finley argues that the consistency of the social world depicted in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* allows us to take it as a singular object referring primarily to the Greek societies of the 10th and 9th centuries BCE. He also argues that in this social world, slavery did not have the same place in the process of production that it would come to have in later greek societies like Classical Athens, citing the predominance of female slaves due to the killing or ransom, rather than enslavement, of male prisoners of war as the primary reason for this. I will challenge both of these assumptions here, arguing that the consistency Finley cites does not stand up to scrutiny and that the poems should be taken as transitional documents, situated between two worlds, one of them being the Early Iron Age world of the 10th and 9th centuries

<sup>20</sup> Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 329–35, and; Detienne, *Masters of Truth*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 96.

and the other the Archaic world in which the poems were composed, with the *Odyssey*, composed later, representing the transition to this later world to a greater extent than the *Iliad*. Following from this, I will also argue that two different configurations of slavery within the broader relations of production are represented in the poems, one in which slavery is primarily a product of war and raiding and has many of the characteristics Finley assigns to it, and another in which slavery increasingly has its source in long distance trade and begins to take on the primacy that it will have in later centuries.

The first thing to note about the Homeric epics contra Finley's assertion of their unity—against which we can supposedly take the anachronistic elements as relatively unimportant and isolateable insertions—is that the unitary themes of both works center around *crises* of the institutions of aristocratic reciprocity that ensured the unity of the social systems depicted and idealized from the aristocratic perspective of the poet.<sup>22</sup> As Richard Seaford argues, we should take the relative omission of central developments taking place at the time of the poems' composition, in particular the development of trade and the crystallization of the money form out of these expanding commodity relations, as a central aspect of this archaizing aristocratic perspective.<sup>23</sup> These developments, to which we can add the tendency towards the occlusion of pastoralism in favor of grain-based agriculture in the primary process of production and the increasingly predominant role of slaves within that process, are the *causes* of the social crisis depicted in the poems and, as such, shape the whole world of the texts despite their explicit omission or downplaying by the poet.

In addition to, and as a result of, this, the coherence that Finley posits in regard to the relations of production depicted in the poems does not hold up to closer inspection. This becomes apparent when we ask the question of how the aristocrats, posited by Finley as not engaged in the primary process of production, derive the surplus on which they live.<sup>24</sup> Finley himself does not ask this question directly, but his characterization of the household structure in which this surplus appropriation must have been carried out, in which the aristocratic householder and his family are primarily supported by female domestic slaves and similarly domestically oriented retainers, leaves a gap in terms of the pastoral and agricultural production on which this domestic labor and the overall subsistence of the household would have to have been based. Even taking

---

<sup>22</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 26–39.

<sup>24</sup> Finley, *World of Odysseus*, 68–70.

into consideration the extra-household forms of surplus appropriation derived from booty and tribute, it seems unlikely that the aristocratic household could sustain itself without a labor force working the fields and pastures. Finley's solution to this problem seems to be the *thetes*, unattached hired laborers who would take up work for the aristocratic household in exchange for means of subsistence.<sup>25</sup> The first problem with this conception is that the number of *thetes* would have to be relatively large compared to the overall population size—and consistently available to the many aristocratic households—in order for this arrangement to sustainably reproduce the aristocracy as a class. That many landless, unattached laborers would mean that the communal constitution as a community of landed proprietors had been undermined to such an extent that it doesn't seem conceivable as stable basis of for social production but rather could only represent a temporary basis indicative of and available within a period of crisis and transition.<sup>26</sup> Not only would it represent a threat to the communal base of Homeric society, but it would also make the aristocratic households dependent on the availability of a transient labor force without evident means of ensuring enough labor was available both during the harvest and for the other ongoing productive labor needed to sustain a farm, not to mention herds. The second problem with Finley's argument about the *thetes* is that it rests in part on a mistaken conception of the social status of the *thes* relative to the slave. Finley supports his argument about the place of the *thes* in the homeric social system with the claim that to be a *thes* was considered worse than being a slave, an argument that E. M. Harris shows is based on a misinterpretation of Achilles' statement to Odysseus that he would rather be a living *thes* than a prince among the dead.<sup>27</sup> This is confirmed by the depiction of the gods Poseidon and Zeus working as *thetes*, which Finley himself cites as evidence of the uncertainty that *thetes* faced in actually receiving their agreed upon pay.<sup>28</sup> The very fact that the gods would work as *thetes* shows their elevated status in comparison with slaves, who are not represented in the deified world of the gods, which undermines Finley's use of them as an answer to the

<sup>25</sup> Finley, *World of Odysseus*, 52–5.

<sup>26</sup> This increasing number of landless peasants does indeed seem to have played a part in Archaic social crises such as the one that lead to the Solonian constitution, which can be seen as an attempt to halt the dispossession and enslavement of the Athenian peasants at the hands of the aristocracy and thereby resolve the *stasis* that threatened to unmake the polity as a whole. This will be addressed in further detail below.

<sup>27</sup> Edward M. Harris, "Homer, Hesiod and the 'Origins' of Greek Slavery," *Revue des Études Anciennes* 114, no. 2 (2012): 357–8, <https://doi.org/10.3406/rea.2012.7067>.

<sup>28</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 53.

labor force question thrust on him by the supposed lack of male slaves.

The answer to this question, or rather the dissolution of it as a question, becomes clear if we take the Homeric poems to contain representations of two different configurations of slavery situated within two different economic structures, one corresponding primarily with the Prehistoric Iron Age societies that form the lost object of the poems and the other with the Proto-historic Iron Age or Archaic societies within which the poems were composed.<sup>29</sup> The first would have been situated within a looser class structure, corresponding to the distributed, village-based settlement patterns that became predominant after the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces and which continued to dominate the landscape up to the Archaic in many regions and even beyond that in others. This was a looser class structure, especially in its early phases, and the surplus appropriated by the warrior elite probably wasn't enough to sustain them absent their own participation in the direct appropriation of the conditions of existence. This surplus would have accrued to them primarily as a result of direct appropriation of the products of other communities, which corresponds to the (probably anachronistic) prevalence of herds (along with slaves and prestige goods) in the representation of the wealth of the Homeric aristocracy, which is a form of moveable wealth that is more easily appropriated in a raid and that differentiated Indo-European elites from the more settled agricultural populations they integrated themselves into as far back as the first migrations out of the steppes.<sup>30</sup> This would have been supplemented and made possible by their receiving a larger share of the land and surplus product of their own communities as a result of their place within the communal labors of religion and self defense.<sup>31</sup> It is in this context that we can place the type of slavery Finley claims is characteristic of the overall social world depicted in the poems, which was primarily war-derived and so consisted largely of female slaves who mostly worked in the household.

This older form of production and surplus appropriation would have also corresponded with an earlier point in the process in which the extended household—remnants of which can still be seen in the house-

<sup>29</sup> These configurations should not be understood as completely separate and exclusive forms that neatly bisect the development of the process of production and the position of slavery within it into two absolutely distinguishable periods, but rather as two analytically distinguishable poles of a process of historical development in which both forms coexisted and came together in all sorts of contradictory and more or less stable articulations, but which overall can be seen as a movement in which the former dissolved itself into the latter.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony, *The Horse, The Wheel and Language*, 366.

<sup>31</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 94–7.

hold of Nestor, as depicted in the *Odyssey*, and the membership of which included the adult children of the primary householder and their families—shrank over time.<sup>32</sup> Each such household would then represent in miniature what Marx called the “asiatic form of commune” in which the communal surplus went to the figure who personally represented the unity of the group.<sup>33</sup> This corresponds with the more “patriarchal” characteristics that Finley identifies with Homeric slavery, although Harris is probably right to discount the extent to which a form of “kinder” or “gentler” slavery ever represented the reality.<sup>34</sup> Still, we can see how in the context of a household constituted primarily by the extended family of the householder, along with a number of primarily female slaves, and in which the labor product of the whole household was equally appropriated and distributed by its head, the differentiation between slave and free might have been more blurred than it would come to be as slaves tended to become the primary labor force on whose surplus labor the subsistence of the aristocratic family as a whole rested, especially given the already subordinated and insecure status of even free women.

The second configuration of slavery within the broader economic structure would have corresponded with a stricter class structure in which slavery had an increasingly central place in the primary process of production, constituting the primary form of surplus labor on which the aristocratic household, and aristocracy as a whole, sustained itself. We see indications of this shift primarily in the *Odyssey*, in which a number of male slaves—like Eumeus the swineherd—are the only characters seen to be involved in the pastoral-agricultural labor that produces the means of subsistence of the non-laboring Odysseus and his household.<sup>35</sup> We don’t actually hear anything about the non-pastoral agricultural labor that we know goes on in Odysseus’ household—most likely due to the archaizing and aristocratic perspective of the poet—but we can assume that it is also done by slaves given that its products seem to just appear from nowhere. This absence may be indicative of the new, less patriarchal relations that obtained between slave and master in the agricultural domain, and which didn’t fit so well with the idealized vision of the heroic warrior depicted in the poems, or possibly even with the store of formulae and materials that formed the oral tradition out of which the poems were built. One of the more significant

<sup>32</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 59. Benveniste, *Dictionary*, 161–4.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 472–3.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, “Homer, Hesiod and the ‘Origins’ of Greek Slavery,” 356–357.

<sup>35</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 50.

aspects of the depiction of this new class of slaves, aside from their being male and working outside the household proper, is that they tended to enter the household as slaves not through capture in battle but through purchase. The purchase of Eumaeus by Laertes from Phoenician traders is exemplary of the connection between this shift in the configuration of slavery and the expansion of trade and commodity relations, in which the Phoenicians played a crucial part, and to the development of which we shall now turn.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the aristocratic perspective of the Homeric epics, we know that commodity exchange was a constant and growing presence within the Greek world during the period under consideration.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the concentration of settlement patterns, which we linked to the consolidation of the aristocratic class above, primarily happened at the sites most involved in long distance commodity trade.<sup>38</sup> The agents of this trade were not primarily the Greeks themselves at this point, but the Phoenicians, who's linking of the Greek communities of Attica and Euboea in particular with a wider Mediterranean trade network can be seen in the wide dispersal of Greek pottery along their trade routes.<sup>39</sup> As noted at the beginning of this section, the development of external trade tends to increase the internal division of labor in a community and the proliferation of internal commodity exchange that goes along with it.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the division of labor in Early Iron Age Greece tended to be intercommunal to a large extent, with highly mobile craftspeople like metal workers and doctors traveling between communities to exchange their goods and services, although we can also see the development of an inner-communal division of labor from the concentration of certain activities such as pottery making and resource extraction at specific sites.<sup>41</sup> This intercommunal positioning of the independent craftspeople may have also played a part in the exchange mediated (re)integration of different communities and branches of industry into the larger, more unified social structures characteristic of the *polis*.

As commodity exchange and the division of labor develop, they have a number of effects on the societies they are embedded within, the most importance of which for our purposes are the aforementioned concentration of settlement patterns, changes in the incentive structure

<sup>36</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 181–187.

<sup>38</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 169.

<sup>39</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 183.

<sup>40</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 471–2.

<sup>41</sup> Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 170–9; Finley, *World of Odysseus*, 52.

and forms of wealth characteristic of aristocratic production, and the crystallization of the money form out of the confluence and repetition of exchange relations. The concentration of settlement patterns in areas connected to the establishment of long distance trade creates larger, more internally differentiated communities (in terms of both wealth inequality and the division of labor) that bring together previously independent populations, and their chiefs, into larger social formations that have both a greater potential for generating the surplus to sustain an aristocratic class and a higher level of inter-elite connectivity and competition. This concentration is necessitated by the diversification of functions required to produce the objects of exchange involved in long-distance trade, and this diversification itself would have produced greater diversification as commodity production branched out from those at first externally-oriented branches. This concentrated diversification of functions is the foundation of what would by the 8th century BCE begin to develop into the *polis*, but even before this, we can see how the expanding sphere of commodity production, along with the increases in population density, the increasing demand for good agricultural land that comes with it, and the expanding dynamic of inter-elite competition that accompany it, would place an increasing demand on the agricultural base that supports both the aristocracy and the non-agricultural craftspeople who produce the exchange goods involved in both domestic and elite-dominated long distance trade.

It is in this context that we should understand the diminishing place of pastoralism in the constitution of aristocratic wealth production and the increasing role of slave dependent agriculture discussed above.<sup>42</sup> The aristocracy were the primary landowners and aristocratic households would have been the primary consumers of the commodities produced by the expanding body of craftsmen due to the size of their households and demand for the prestige goods (and other goods that supported communal and hierarchizing relational institutions like the sacrificial feast or other forms of banqueting) through which inter-elite competition and status demarcation were mediated, whether these goods derived from local commodity producers or from long-distance trade, which itself would have created a demand for local commodity production to supply equivalents.<sup>43</sup> Some of this demand would have been

---

<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that pastoralism was the dominant form of production, nor that agriculture only began to become a primary source of means of subsistence with this transition, but rather to highlight a tendency that applies in particular to the forms of aristocratic wealth.

<sup>43</sup> It should also be noted here that the relative transportability, and so suitability

met by booty, which is the primary form in which we see it met in the epics, but the archaeological record tells us that it was also met by local production, which probably reflects both the increasing scope of exchange relations and, more speculatively, the decreasing availability or increasing demandingness of raiding as more integrated territories lowered the number of local communities that could be targeted in raids and the consolidation of other communities—along with technological advancements—made raiding more costly, even if also more profitable.<sup>44</sup> To sustain these commodity relations, aristocratic households would have needed to produce a larger surplus, the demand for which seems to have been met, at least in part, by the increasing use of their land for agricultural rather than pastoral purposes and the import of foreign slaves to work that land whether by tending flocks or working the fields.<sup>45</sup> As the surplus labor appropriated by the aristocracy came to be more and more enmeshed in networks of commodity relations, and less and less dependent on raiding and the direct appropriation of booty, it also would have generally become less dependent on the place of the aristocrat in the martial and religious communal surplus labor and more dependent on private appropriation of surplus labor based on their private ownership of the means of production, foremost among which was land.

Over time, the money form began to arise out of this growing sphere of exchange. In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx lays out the conceptual development of the value form from the simple form in which one particular commodity expresses its value in terms of another particu-

---

as objects of trade, of agricultural products compared to pastoral ones probably played a role in this shift.

<sup>44</sup> For local production, see Knodell, *Societies in Transition*, 176–9. As Marx says in the second chapter of *Capital*, “In order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons whose will resides in these objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and alienate his own, except through an act to which both parties consent.” Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 178. From this, we can see how over time, as this kind of relation and the subjective dispositions corresponding to it became ingrained, the expansion of commodity relations, both within and between communities, would reduce the scope of possibilities for raiding, and also lead to the gradual replacement of things like the blood feud (a constitutive element of the elite social crisis depicted in the *Odyssey*) with the monetized juridical relations characteristic of the *polis*.

<sup>45</sup> Other, at times coexisting, strategies for intensifying the exploitation that sustained these commodity relations include tenancy, serfdom, debt bondage, and probably the violent or debt-facilitated expropriation of land belonging to the commoners. See De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 137–174. Harris, “A New Solution to the Riddle of the Seisachtheia,” 105–6.

lar commodity, through the expanded form in which one commodity expresses its value in a number of other commodities and the general form in which a number of commodities express their value in one commodity, to the money form in which the general form has become exclusively expressed in a single type of commodity, which serves as the universal equivalent in which all other commodities express their value, and which historically has tended to be embodied in gold.<sup>46</sup> In the second chapter he clarifies that this conceptual development is actualized in a historical development in which “money necessarily crystallizes out of the process of exchange,” the description of which was quoted at length above<sup>47</sup> We can see evidence of multiple stages of this reciprocal process of commodification and monetization in a number of passages from the Homeric epics, especially those that form exceptions to the general downplaying of trade by the poet. Among the most notable of these is an example of the expanded form of value, cited by Marx as such in *Capital*, in which the trader Euneus exchanges wine for a number of different goods possessed by the soldiers in the Greek camp.<sup>48</sup> Another example is the frequent measurement of the value of goods in terms of cattle, which probably represents an early form of general equivalent before its replacement by precious metal. Finally, there are a few passages, collected together by Seaford, in which the growing status of gold and silver as predominant, if not exclusive, general equivalent is indicated, coupled in almost every case with authorial attempts to present it in a negative context, which is itself revealing of the influence which gold and silver had acquired as general equivalents in the period in which the poems were composed.<sup>49</sup>

## Bibliography

ANTHONY, DAVID W. *The Horse, the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

BENVENISTE, ÉMILE. *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*. Translated by Elizabeth Palmer. Chicago: Hau Books, 2016.

DE STE. CROIX, G. E. M. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: from*

<sup>46</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 138–63.

<sup>47</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 181.

<sup>48</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 32.

*the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.

FINLEY, MOSES I. *The World of Odysseus*. New York: New York Review Books, 2002.

HARRIS, EDWARD M. "Homer, Hesiod, and the « Origins » of Greek Slavery". *Revue des Études Anciennes* 114 (2012)(2): 345–366. doi: 10.3406/reab.2012.7067.

KNODELL, ALEX R. *Societies in Transition in Early Greece: An Archaeological History*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021.

MARX, KARL. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by David Fernbach, volume vol. III. Penguin classics edition, London: Penguin Books, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. Penguin classics, London, 1993.

SEAFORD, RICHARD. *Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

## Appendix 3 -Précis of Mannheim’s Ideology and Utopia

Samuel J. Thomas

While Horkheimer’s paper in the *ZfS* provides a decent overview of Mannheim’s position, it is sparse and focused mainly on points of disagreement rather than providing a full overview of Mannheim’s thought. This appendix aims to rectify this. One may wonder why it appears here, given that Mannheim was never a member of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* and his influence on the members of the IfS was distant at best. There are a few reasons to focus on Mannheim. First, as Mannheim was a faculty member at the University of Frankfurt, his influence on German academia as a whole was rather large during the heyday of the IfS. Consequently, Mannheim’s influence is in the cultural aether and is a partially positive, and partially negative, touchstone for the Frankfurt School, even (implicitly and certainly far from uncritically) in the “temporal core of truth”<sup>1</sup> which Adorno and Horkheimer reference in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Second, to appreciate Horkheimer’s conception of ideology, especially during his time as the director of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, one must be at least somewhat acquainted with Mannheim’s conception of ideology to fully understand Horkheimer’s critique thereof. Third, both Mannheim and early Critical Theory positioned themselves between Kant and Hegel, though in different ways. It is therefore instructive to show how Mannheim’s intervention between the two is suboptimal compared to the more illuminating version that the Frankfurt School provides. To that end, this blog post serves both as a brief introduction to Mannheim’s thought as a means to understanding the intellectual milieu to which Horkheimer responds.

As an aside, I believe Kant to be the most prevalent influence on Mannheim’s thought. I therefore use verbiage associated with Kant (especially “categories” and “dogmatism,” “skepticism,” and “criticism”) that Mannheim often does not explicitly use, though leaves implicit for the astute reader to abduce.

---

<sup>1</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi.

To appreciate Horkheimer's critique of Mannheim, one must first sketch out a few general points that Mannheim underlines time and again in the book. The book's subtitle, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, provides us with Mannheim's aim: to explain how *real* people (contra philosophers) think.<sup>2</sup> Just as one's language is not only one's own, but shaped by the society one is in, so too do social forces shape one's thought. Hence, Mannheim abandons the high ground of "thought as such"<sup>3</sup> to examine thought in specific concrete situations. This implies that one must engage in an analysis at the level of the group rather than the individual, since not only do people live together, but they also *think* together. Attempting to sever thought from the historical circumstances which give rise to it is to render it impotent and incapable of action.<sup>4</sup> To explain real people's thought processes is to also explain their behavior. Though this framework may seem to militate against scientific objectivity, Mannheim thinks it both possible and desirable to achieve a sort of objectivity in sociological analysis *if* the investigator makes explicit the unconscious biases which catalyze the investigation and shape its general course.<sup>5</sup>

Mannheim distinguishes the "sociology of knowledge" from *ideology*. For Mannheim, "ideology" can denote two related things: either a "particular conception of ideology"<sup>6</sup> that refers to a specific belief or assertion, and the "total conception of ideology"<sup>7</sup> which refers to a total *Weltanschauung* that a given group adopts. Invocations of both types of ideological conceptions require the invoker to not take their interlocutor's claims at face value. Yet one crucial difference is that *particular* conceptions of ideology leave open the possibility of a common epistemic framework with which to resolve the dispute. Differences between *total* conceptions of ideology, however, involve categorical differences which preclude such a common framework.<sup>8</sup> Thus, invocations of *particular* ideological beliefs are claims about an interlocutor's psychology, while differences in total conceptions of ideology are structural in nature, due to "a correspondence between a given social situation and a given perspective."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the totalizing element of total conceptions

---

<sup>2</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

of ideology mean that even a flesh and blood “bearer of ideology”<sup>10</sup> only participates in “certain fragments of this thought-system.”<sup>11</sup> Not even aggregating the individual fragments can get us a complete mosaic. Thus, analyzing individual particular ideologies may only get us specific (and possibly idiosyncratic) psychological states of the bearers and *not* the *total* ideology as such, which requires the investigator to reconstruct “the systematic theoretical basis underlying the single judgements of the individual.”<sup>12</sup> Even aggregating the *psychological states* of individual ideological bearers does not get us a complete picture of the total conception of ideology, which requires us to “know [...] the theoretical implications of my mode of thought which are identical with those of my fellow members of the group.”<sup>13</sup>

Just as Mannheim distinguishes between the particular and total conceptions of ideology, so too does he claim that these two concepts arise out of different historical developments. While distrust toward others is commonplace, what distinguishes claims that others are in the grasp of an ideology can only develop when distrust “becomes explicit and is methodically recognized.”<sup>14</sup> Ideological claims are not intended to deceive; they are a midpoint between “a simple lie at one pole, and an error [...] at the other.”<sup>15</sup> A particular ideological belief is the result of an unintentional psychological distortion that follows “inevitably and unwittingly from certain causal determinants.”<sup>16</sup> For this reason, the task of a sociologist of knowledge is *not* to resent those who make ideological claims, but to uncover the social forces which give rise to them. Mannheim then traces the concept of ideology along a tenuous historical development from Bacon to Machiavelli and finally Hume. From the former, Mannheim sees the origin of the claim that society and tradition may lead us to error (though he thinks that Bacon’s concept of the *idola* is far from the modern conception of ideology).<sup>17</sup> From Machiavelli one can see that our awareness of ideology stems from participation in the political world. Those Florentine magistrates, who ascended to power after driving out the Medici in 1494, would often be deceived about general matters until knowledge of the particular “removed that deception

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 55.

that, in considering [the matter] generally, one had presupposed.”<sup>18</sup> Those who heard the magistrates change their mind concluded that this change was due to understanding the matter more fully, but due to political corruption. From this, the common expression “those people have one mind in the piazza and one in the palazzo”<sup>19</sup> arose, which Machiavelli quotes and Mannheim takes to be an embryonic form of the type of attribution of men’s thought to their interests that particular ideology does.<sup>20</sup> According to Mannheim, Hume takes this and generalizes it, claiming that rationally investigating a matter requires us to presume that others have a tendency to deceive us for their ends. We thus must decode the *true* meaning of our interlocutors’ claims “that lies concealed behind a camouflage of words.”<sup>21</sup> Invoking the notion of particular ideology is one (albeit uncouth) way to penetrate the illusory fog that masks one’s (perhaps unknown) presuppositions.

So much for the etiology of particular ideology: what of the *total* conception of ideology? This latter type of ideological innovation stems from a world in flux, “in which fundamental new values are being created and old ones destroyed.”<sup>22</sup> While the feudal order provided a common lingua franca with which to settle intellectual conflict, the rise of capitalism changed not only the relations of production but the relations of thought as well. The fundamental philosophical shifts which occurred at the dawn of capitalism were so profound that they constituted not a difference in degree with the old ideas they supplanted, but a difference in kind. The first step in this development was the “development of a philosophy of consciousness”<sup>23</sup> that Kant, with his emphasis on the individual’s contribution to the categorization of the world, constitutes the apex of. The transcendental deduction of the categories is the embryonic form of the total conception of ideology because it places the individual at the helm of experiential cognition. The shift from Kant to Hegel marks the transition to the second stage of the development of total ideology. Not only is the world a unity, but it is now *historical* in nature, where one can chronicle different Volksgeister as bearers of different stages in the development of the Geist of

<sup>18</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, trans. mine, (Milano: BUR Rizzoli, 2018), I.XLVII.23, p. 161. «la cognizione delle cose particolari gli toglieva via quello inganno che nel considerarle generalmente si aveva presupposto.»

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., I.XLVII.25. «costoro hanno uno animo in piazza e uno in palazzo.»

<sup>20</sup> Mannheim, *op. cit.*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 58.

freedom.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, brute experience is no longer the bedrock of justification; experience itself becomes interrogated by making explicit the assumptions which make it possible and the historical course thereof. The French Revolution's concretization of consciousness into *l'esprit du peuple* also represents the *politicization* of such a process.<sup>25</sup> In a footnote, Mannheim emphasizes that the task of the sociology of knowledge is not to trace ideas back as remotely as possible, lest it lead to regress. Rather, ideas are placed in the context of extant sociopolitical forces, and for this reason objections that there is nothing new under the sun fall. The final, most important step in this process occurs when class replaces the *Volk* as the "bearer of the historically evolving consciousness,"<sup>26</sup> that is, when the Marxian tradition discovers that the proletariat has at last become the subject-object of history and that changes in the relations and means of production cause a corresponding change in the ideal *Überbau*. The result of this process, per Mannheim, is twofold: consciousness becomes an increasingly large organic unity, and this unity becomes less rigid and formulaic. Hence, consciousness is no longer ahistorical and universal, but varies based on time and space, as does the unity thereof.<sup>27</sup> There are two important consequences Mannheim draws from this: first, that "human affairs cannot be understood by an isolation of their elements,"<sup>28</sup> and secondly, that the meaning of the unity of these elements changes based on historical circumstances. At the end of this process, particular and total ideology, which were never *fully* distinct, converge upon each other further. Where we once accused our opponents of unconscious falsification due to psychological deficiencies, we now accuse them of being unable to think correctly thanks to structural forces on the "nootological level."<sup>29</sup> The rise of total ideology raises the question of how false consciousness, by which Mannheim means "the totally distorted mind which falsifies everything which comes within its range,"<sup>30</sup> could have arisen.

Here, Mannheim claims that the concept has a religious origin. Despite its ancient origin, the more important methodological *form* of false consciousness is modern. The secularization of the concept not only entails new methods for determining the truth, but "even the scale

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

of values by which we measure truth and falsity, reality and unreality have been profoundly transformed.”<sup>31</sup> To appreciate this transformation, Mannheim thinks it necessary to give a historical account of the origins of the concept. While the term “ideology” was originally associated with a French philosophical school which “rejected metaphysics and sought to base the cultural sciences on anthropological and psychological foundations,”<sup>32</sup> Napoleon gave the term a new pejorative sense: an “ideologist” was a rigid doctrinaire. This was derogatory because the ideologue’s thought was now unrealistic and inapplicable as a practical guide. Hence, Mannheim argues that practice is the barometer by which one measures whether a given system of thought is ideological. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “ideology” came to gain this sense, and hence the question of what is *really* the case (as opposed to what the ideologue *claims* to be the case) is always implicit in any accusations of ideological bias. That questions of what constitutes reality gain a political valence is an important turning point in the development of the concept of ideology and make possible the development of a sociology of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Due to the politicization of ideological bias, ideologies become increasingly counterposed to pragmatism. Mannheim relays the anecdote about Napoleon giving the term its derogatory sense to show that the question of ideology escaped the ivory tower of academia and became a practical concern. Moreover, the politicization of ideology as a concept allows for it to become a “weapon” or tool that one political group may use against another.<sup>34</sup> While this starts off with the proletariat using the concept as a part of class analysis, the concept has become generalized to such a degree that no viewpoint can escape accusations of ideology. However, the predominance of ideology in Marxist thought is notable because Marx’s Hegelian background allows for a merger of the particular and total conceptions of ideology. No longer were invocations of ideology merely a way to posit an individual ideological bias, but rather a more comprehensive and philosophical false consciousness. Furthermore, the Marxist insistence on the inseparability of theory from practice gives ideology a predominant conception in the Marxist tradition.<sup>35</sup> However, this does not mean that accusations of ideological bias are the domain of Marxists alone: today, every group invokes the concept against all others. Mannheim cites the rise of, *inter alia*, Max Weber as one such instance of

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 64

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 67.

this generalization. Consequently, the very tool that has played a central role in Marxist thought now became a weapon that others brandished against it.

Marxism discovered the clue to understanding thought by discovering the concept of ideology, and rival political forces were forced to use the concept in retaliation, thereby generalizing the concept of ideology beyond its Marxist roots. This expansion of ideological thought creates a new epistemic framework; when one analyzes one's opponents ideologically, "all elements of meaning are qualitatively changed and the word ideology acquires a totally new meaning."<sup>36</sup> All previous concepts undergo a transformation thanks to the introduction of the concept of ideology. This intensifies when moving from the particular to total conception of ideology, as the latter throws even the categories of an opponent's thought into question via sociological analysis. Yet to merely restrict this sociological analysis to an opponent's ideology is to leave the task incomplete. This restriction constitutes the *special* formulation of the total conception of ideology, which Mannheim distinguishes from a *general* form of the total conception of ideology, in which "the analyst has the courage to subject not just the adversary's point of view but all points of view, including his own, to the ideological analysis."<sup>37</sup> The *general* form recognizes that all thought, by all groups in all eras, "is of an ideological character."<sup>38</sup> By transitioning from the special to general form of total ideology, one at last reaches Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, in which a social group uncovers the "situational determination"<sup>39</sup> of its political opponents before elevating this determination to a general principle which applies to all. In this context, two approaches to ideological analysis arrive: the former consists in showing the interrelation between thought and social position while renouncing the unmasking of opponents, while the latter consists in treating one's own ideology as an *idee fixe* and combining it with a given epistemology.<sup>40</sup> According to the latter approach, reliable knowledge may either be constituted via *relationism* or via *relativism*. Relativism stems from the modern recognition that historical thinking is tied up with the thinker's social position, but combines this with an older, more dogmatic<sup>41</sup> epistemology that rejected the thinker's standpoint as a condition of knowledge. To escape

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>41</sup> "Dogmatic" is used here in the Kantian sense.

relativism, one must combine this modern insight with the claim that what conflicts with thought is not epistemology *simpliciter* but “a certain historically transitory type of epistemology.”<sup>42</sup> For Mannheim, a modern epistemology must assume that in certain intellectual spheres it is “impossible to conceive of absolute truth existing independently of the values and position of the subject and unrelated to the social context.”<sup>43</sup> After recognizing that all historical knowledge is relational, one may discern truth from falsity by asking which social determination gets an optimal amount of truth, while recognizing that reaching historically and socially independent truths is quixotic. When dealing with the general-total conception of ideology, one must distinguish between two approaches: that of a value-free analysis, and an “epistemological and metaphysically oriented normative approach.”<sup>44</sup> In the former, one approaches the question of ideology by merely discovering how thought relates to the social situation of the milieu which promotes said thought. One need not think it a source of error to investigate thought in this manner. But this approach does have limits, for it entails that thinkers are unable to understand certain problems if their situational determination forbids it. The sociologist of knowledge, then, attempts to show the limits of each ideology and their interrelation within the total social process.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, by showing how “certain intellectual standpoints are connected with certain forms of experience,”<sup>46</sup> one can show why it cannot be the case that, contra philosophers’ self-aggrandizement, there is no eternal set of categories which may unfold in historically determined ways. In effect, the sociology of knowledge acts as a defeater to claims of ahistorically valid categories of thought. Even the notion of *value* (in a normative sense) is historically determined, and conflation between ethical, aesthetic, and religious value is a product of the primacy of economic thought in bourgeois society.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the attempt to invoke universal, objective formal categories is characteristic of modern rationalization which discounts the irrational forces which are also in play in shaping human life. Differing modes of thought across both time and culture not only have differing content but different *categories*, which change as the social group which uses said categories changes.

Consequently, the sociologist of knowledge is unconcerned with dis-

---

<sup>42</sup> Mannheim, *op. cit.*, 70.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 70—1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

covering putatively transhistorical truth, but of discovering “the approximate truth as it emerges in the course of historical development out of the complex social process.”<sup>48</sup> This alleged epistemic humility, Mannheim claims, will lead us closer to the truth than a dogmatic insistence that one has the whole truth. Only the present, in which all fixed social structures are thrown into question and in which there are sundry viewpoints “of equal value and prestige, each showing the relativity of the other,”<sup>49</sup> could values have been subjected to ideological criticism. Epistemic humility is the order of the day; self-confidence leads to bias and a one-sided point of view which can only be supplemented by others when one interacts with conflicting views.<sup>50</sup> This also requires us to face the fact that all values and viewpoints are subject to situational determination.<sup>51</sup> The non-evaluative investigation into situational determination leads to relationism, the claim that “all [...] elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought.”<sup>52</sup> Knowledge, though historically determined, is still *knowledge*. Changes in the social situation therefore throw all hitherto norms and knowledge out of alignment. All knowledge is knowledge *about* some object, and depends on the knower both in its qualitative depth (i.e., *scientia*, mere understanding, or some lesser degree of understanding in the Early Modern schematism) and the transmission of knowledge. The categories which we use to organize and transmit knowledge are determined by the social situation of the thinker, and hence partial knowledge is connected to a larger organic unity of meaning. Since the social situation and the categories of thought which correspond to it are always in flux, one must think dynamically rather than in ahistorical absolutes. This implies a rejection of conservatism; “[t]hose who are satisfied with the existing order of things are [...] likely to set up the chance situation of the moment as absolute and eternal;”<sup>53</sup> requiring self-aggrandizing myths in defense of the status quo to “distort, pervert, and conceal the meaning of the present.”<sup>54</sup>

However, we arrive *post festum* at the conclusion that, despite its pretensions to a non-evaluative approach, the concept of ideology requires

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> This displays a clear Millian influence, down to the insistence that past epochs were the domain of unearned dead dogma.

<sup>51</sup> Mannheim, *op. cit.*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

an evaluative and metaphysical approach. In the process of criticizing static thought, Mannheim recognizes that he has used “metaphysical-ontological value-judgements of which [he has] not been aware.”<sup>55</sup> This need not be cause for concern, as unmasking the presuppositions of thought requires a foundation of “certain meta-empirical, ontological, and metaphysical judgements.”<sup>56</sup> Even positivism, which attempted to forego such foundational suppositions, implicitly did so when putting faith in progress and scientific realism. There is no danger in *a priori* knowledge *per se*, but merely that receiving a ready-made ontology unquestioningly “obstructs new developments.”<sup>57</sup> To allow for change, one must emphasize the situational determination of one’s viewpoint and make explicit the implicit metaphysical suppositions that undergirds one’s thought and allows for the possibility of empirical knowledge.

So which metaphysical approach does the non-evaluative conception of ideology take? There are two possible paths one may take. The former *mystical* approach dismisses all history as transient and epiphenomenal, and hence unable to grasp the fundamental, ahistorical truths.<sup>58</sup> While mysticism never gained much purchase in a world where day-to-day affairs were given primary significance, its insistence on the interconnectedness of all things in the Godhead survives as a secularized methodological truth: that all partial truths gain significance thanks to its connection to the social situation which supplies it with the categories of its meaning. On the other hand, the second approach which leads to sociological methodology insists that history is not the mere assemblage of arbitrary events, but “must be regarded as following a certain necessary regularity.”<sup>59</sup> This realization renders history as important rather than incidental. While the mystic insists that humanity is not fully encompassed by history, this does not entail that history is unimportant. Rather, history is the “matrix within which man’s essential nature is expressed.”<sup>60</sup> One gains subjectivity within the bounds of the ever-varying social institutions, which in turn furnish a dynamic series of viewpoints “in terms of which each social-historical subject becomes aware of himself and acquires an appreciation of his past.”<sup>61</sup> Even if one can only understand human essence mystically, this essence must

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 80

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

"bear some relation to social and historical reality."<sup>62</sup> A mystical viewpoint overlooks the very forces of history which shape mankind into what it is. Even though Mannheim (allegedly) rejects a *telos* of history, history is nonetheless an important object to analyze, as it provides the situational determinations which imbue ideas with their meaning.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the study of history is the study of the totality; the study of ideology shows that *Weltanschauungen* are not arbitrary. Their unfurling signals "a cross-section of the total intellectual and social situation of our time."<sup>64</sup> While this begins as a non-evaluative practice, evaluation and ontological judgment come in as it is needed to separate the wheat of history from the chaff.

Hence, there is a conceptual transition from the non-evaluative general, total conception of ideology to the evaluative conception, though this evaluative conception does not take as static the values of a given era.<sup>65</sup> Rather, it is evaluative in the sense that it seeks to differentiate the true and insightful from the false and spurious modes of thought. The question of false consciousness is hence transformed from how it obscures static reality to how it obscures reality as "the outcome of constant reorganization of the mental processes which make up our worlds."<sup>66</sup> While the secularization of the concept of false consciousness by searching for the criterion of validity in practice, it did not go far enough while it remained ahistorical and posited thought and action as two separate poles. This marriage of thought and action renders any ethical belief invalid if it is formed in such a way that no action in a given historical setting can comply with it. Moral transgressions are invalid if they are the result not of individual failings but of "an erroneously founded set of moral axioms."<sup>67</sup> Moral interpretations of these actions are invalid if forbids action and thought to adapt to new social situations. Moral theories are wrong if it uses categories in inapt situations which prevent people from adjusting to changes in circumstances. These outdated modes of thought become ideological "whose function is to conceal the actual function of conduct rather than to reveal it."<sup>68</sup> Mannheim cites the taboo against usury as a moral practice that lapsed into an ideology. While the norm took root in societies based on intimate

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

interpersonal relations, it became ideological as it became adopted by large impersonal social structures, viz., the Catholic Church. Eventually, the shift to capitalism caused even the Church to discard the norm as an outdated ideological remnant. An example of false consciousness as false interpretation of oneself, Mannheim cites the tendency to obscure one's *real* relation to the world via escapism and self-aggrandizement (especially by putative allegiance to ideals that mask our real reasons for action). An example of ideological distortion that occurs when it can no longer explain the actual world is that of the landed gentry who insists on using feudal categories in what has clearly become a capitalistic enterprise. The conception of ideology in play is both *evaluative* in that it "presupposes certain judgements concerning the reality of ideas and structures of consciousness,"<sup>69</sup> and *dynamic* as "these judgements are always measured by a reality which is in constant flux."<sup>70</sup> Thus, over and above common sources of error, we also must be vigilant about "the effects of a distorted mental structure."<sup>71</sup> This distortion may be because they are outdated or too avant-garde (the latter of which gains the moniker *utopian*). Either way, the ideology is measured against a dynamic reality.

Mannheim concludes his project by claiming that the struggle to escape "ideological and utopian distortions is [...] a quest for reality."<sup>72</sup> This quest involves grounding thought in action, and keeping fidelity to the "actual situation to be comprehended."<sup>73</sup> Yet ideology and utopia throw the concept of reality into question: no longer is it accepted as a static, ahistorical entity which we can dogmatically assume, but rather differing conceptions of reality produce different "modes of thought."<sup>74</sup> Consequently "every ontological judgement that we make leads inevitably to far-reaching consequences."<sup>75</sup> Ignoring this problem may be pragmatic: we may avoid the need to critique the categories of our "conceptual devices"<sup>76</sup> so long as they prove adequate to the task of dealing with our "highly restricted sphere of life."<sup>77</sup> But when faced with the different categories of experience present in earlier epochs, we are faced with the following question: "under what conditions may

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

we say that the realm of experience of a group has changed so fundamentally that a discrepancy becomes apparent between the traditional mode of thought and the novel objects of experience (to be understood by that mode of thought?).<sup>78</sup> Assuming that theoretical reasons caused the change is too intellectualistic, and appealing to “special cultural sciences”<sup>79</sup> is fraught as such disciplines carve the world at joints abstracted from concrete reality. The academic division of labor poses its own problems, incentivizing scholars to narrow the confines of their studies to such an extent that an overall coherent picture is lost. This does not make such investigations useless, but one should keep in mind that the social sciences, much like the natural sciences, has reached a point where “empirical data compel [it] to raise certain questions about [its] presuppositions.”<sup>80</sup> So long as empirical research remains within the confines of a given situational determination’s common sense, it cannot criticize its fundamental concepts. The crisis that this inability causes has swelled into a crescendo, even affecting empirical research itself. This is not to deny the existence of facts, but merely to show that facts “exist for the mind always in an intellectual and social context.”<sup>81</sup> One needs a “conceptual apparatus”<sup>82</sup> to frame facts. Differing apparatuses use different categories of experience differently, and hence represent and perceive facts through different logical categories. Our categories thus impose a viewpoint on us, but the more comprehensive our conception of rival apparatuses, the more phenomena we can account for. This appears in empirical research, where Max Weber has shown that particularity of viewpoint is demonstrated by the limitations of the definitions that the investigator chooses to deploy. These viewpoints are themselves influenced by “a good many unconscious steps in our thinking.”<sup>83</sup> Two dogmas prevented a critical examination of the categories used in intellectual investigations. First, a deflationary dogma (associated with logical positivism) dismissed these questions as irrelevant, granting validity only to analytic a priori knowledge on one hand and empirical truths on the other.<sup>84</sup> A second dogma divided the division of intellectual labor in two, assigning the sciences the empirical questions

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>84</sup> Note that this division has fallen out of favor as of late, due in large part due to the defense of contingent a priori and necessary a posteriori knowledge in Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*.

and philosophy the “loftier”<sup>85</sup> speculative ones. This allowed philosophy to maintain the pretense of being the queen of the sciences, so long as it did not interfere with scientific investigation. Unity is thereby undermined, leaving the philosopher ill-equipped to clarify “the observer’s own mind in the total situation”<sup>86</sup> and the scientist unable to get a more complete picture of a totality based on the results of empirical investigation. “For mastery of each historical situation, a certain structure of thought is required which will rise to the demands of the actual, real problems encountered, and is capable of integrating what is relevant in the various conflicting points of view.”<sup>87</sup> This requires a search for a “fundamental axiomatic point of departure”<sup>88</sup> which should attempt to find a totality rather remain stuck at the level of the limitations of an individual point of view. Only by recognizing the limitations of each point of view can one reach a comprehension of the whole. That we can see that there is a crisis represents a step forward, not an intellectual dead-end, as “[t]hought is a process determined by actual social forces, continually questioning its findings and correcting its procedure.”<sup>89</sup> Even totality is not eternally valid, but “implies both the assimilation and transcendence of the limitations of particular points of view.”<sup>90</sup> Its telos is not an ahistorical and universal truth, but “the broadest possible extension of our horizon of vision.”<sup>91</sup> Discovering the “fundamental conditions which determine [one’s] social and intellectual existence”<sup>92</sup> provides someone with the impetus to go beyond the confines of one’s point of view to discover the way in which this point of view is part of a situational determination. This in turn sheds light on the way in which one’s viewpoint is situated within an overall historical process. This is the “ever-widening drive towards a total conception.”<sup>93</sup> If new “problems of thought arise, men must learn to think anew.”<sup>94</sup> While we previously were stuck in a naïve dogmatism toward our intellectual process, we are now “grappling with the critical situation that has arisen in [our] thinking”<sup>95</sup> to aim at clarity.

---

85 Mannheim, *op. cit.*, 92.

86 Ibid., 93.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 94.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid., 95.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., 96.

95 Ibid.

## Bibliography

- HORKHEIMER, MAX AND THEODOR W. ADORNO. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- MACHIAVELLI, NICCOLÒ. *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*. Number L 475 in Biblioteca universale Rizzoli I classici della BUR, 3rd edition, Milano: Biblioteca universale Rizzoli, 1996.
- MANNHEIM, KARL. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.